

THE OLD TESTAMENT WORLD by John Rogerson & Philip Davies. *C.U.P.*, 1989. 384pp. £19.50.

Over the past decade there has been a significant change in Biblical studies as the archaeology, geography and anthropology of the world in which the scriptures originated and developed have been brought to bear on the investigation of the written text.

The book under review is by two eminent Old Testament scholars who know the text inside out and who have really done their homework in the fields of archaeology, history and geography. The result is a book which starts from a secure knowledge of the text and then applies the other disciplines without distorting the evidence to fit the text. This happy combination has resulted in a work which presents the world of the Old Testament in astonishing scholarly detail, yet the clear and precise literary style makes the text approachable to anyone who is at all acquainted with Bible study.

The authors set the Old Testament in a wider context than is usual, which may disturb some readers. It becomes apparent that, just as in today's world, politics is the real reason for action. Understanding the way family relationships operated at that time often puts Israelite internecine strife and chicanery, not to mention the *deus ex machina* of Yahweh, on the level of Greek tragedy. Bias and racial prejudice dictate the tenor of much of the narrative and stance of the Old Testament. In all these respects Israel was little different from her neighbours and indeed it is true that 'they helped to shape Israel's culture; without knowing them we do not know Israel's world' (p. 63).

Part I of the book describes the setting in which the Biblical text was formed. The geography and climate of the Bible lands (Chapter 1) is made interesting by relating the areas under discussion closely to stories and incidents found in the Old Testament, and illustrating the text with photographs of the relevant countryside. The authors do not shy away from controversial topics. For example, the fact that some Israelites were slaves in a society which based much of its theology on the idea that its ancestors had been released from the bondage of Egypt (pp 41–43), and that the monarchy governed the country by a network of nepotism, are discussed frankly (pp 47–51). Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the social organisation within Israel and with the daily lives of her neighbours. The section on foreign nations is very informative but 'neighbours' here includes the Canaanites, people among whom the Israelites were living and from whom they took their culture.

Part II is entitled 'The History and Religion of Israel' and includes an excellent account of the establishment of the monarchy and some surprisingly good arguments for the religious superiority of the 'breakaway' Northern Kingdom over the 'orthodox' Southern Kingdom (Chapter 5). This book is full of surprises which are there, not for effect, but because more recent evidence has overturned many of the presuppositions that have held the field for far too long. See Chapter 6 on the Exile in Babylon, for example. Even the myth of totally accurate recall in the oral transmission of tradition is exploded. As the authors remind us, 'A story is a telling not a text.' (p. 217)

The thorough groundwork of the first seven chapters prepares the

reader for an informed examination, in Part III, of the various groups of books of the Bible. The going sometimes gets tough in this section, not because the authors are unable to keep up their lucid style, but simply because text criticism is not a simple activity. All credit is due to Rogerson and Davies for their success in making a complicated subject not only comprehensible but also enjoyable. Part IV gives an account of the formation of the Old Testament.

There are many misprints and grammatical mistakes in the text, indicating that the proofs were not thoroughly scanned: 'humities' decisions' for humanity's decisions (p. 226); brackets that don't close (p. 278), 'Hasonean' for Hasmonean; 'adovcate' for advocate (p. 304); 'king of a lustful foreign nation' for lustful king of a foreign nation (p. 226), to name but a few. The picture of Masada filling pages 186/7 is printed back to front. A confused retelling (p. 92) of the important Egyptian myth of Osiris, who is killed and whose parts are scattered over the land to be recovered and restored to life by his devoted wife, Isis, has made their son, Horus the corpse, depriving it of much of its power and beauty.

But the most serious mistake in this book which, as the dust-jacket proclaims, aims to 'build up a complete picture of the people who created the literature, and their world', is to use Byzantine and Mediaeval art as the source of many of its illustrations. Such pictures tell us about Byzantine and Mediaeval life and throw no light on the biblical period. Indeed, they reinforce many of the erroneous ideas we have of biblical scenes and characters. What can a picture of mediaeval peasants and artisans building an ornate Gothic cathedral tell us about the construction and design of the Solomonic Temple, for example? (p. 137). And did King David really look like Edward the Confessor playing a harp whose design is European C13 AD? (p. 268) Does it have anything to say about the Israelite monarchy at the time of David? This is a serious lapse of judgement in an otherwise splendidly written and illustrated volume.

However, these irritating aberrations should not dissuade anyone from reading the book, which is probably the best thing of its kind yet produced. I hope the authors are now thinking of a second volume, about the world of the New Testament.

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RICHARD ROLLE: THE ENGLISH WRITINGS trans., ed. and introduced by Rosamund S. Allen. Preface by Valerie M. Lagoria. *Classics of Western Spirituality*. SPCK, First pub. 1931, O.P., Repub. 1988 x + 232pp, £13.50.

Richard Rolle was the first of the English mystics of the fourteenth century, and therefore one of the earliest writers in vernacular English. And yet his English writings have been hard to come by for some time: in contrast to his Latin treatise, *Incendium Amoris*, which is readily available in a modern English version (from the middle English translation made by Richard Misyn). There is some sense in this, for Rolle, in contrast to his junior, Walter Hilton, seems to have been more at ease in Latin than in English. Nevertheless he did write in English, and heralded the remarkable flowering

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