

awakening. Boardman believes that almost at the end of his life he found the answer to his search in this poem. 'For Thompson the ladder had an added meaning. Was the poem inspired by the sudden memory of the Sussex downs imposed on the scene of his present life with its other memories of his life on the streets? So it seems. The *Ode to the Setting Sun* was completed 'ascending and descending' the 'Jacob's ladder' cut into the downs above Storrington. Now the shadow cast over the sun by the Cross uniting earth with heaven, the two dimensions of his poetic vision in a movement which, as a poet, Thompson felt himself unequal to express. Unquestionably he did so here. The ladder reaches to heaven, because, like the Cross — so significantly recalled at this point in the poem — it is firmly founded in the earthbound reality of human life'.

This is a triumph of architectonic vision articulating the whole sweep of Thompson's vision. I can see now why the image of the ladder survives and why Thompson is more than a flawed genius.

It is a pity there are twenty three misprints (at least) in such a fine work from so prestigious a publisher.

GERARD MEATH OP

**READING THE NEW TESTAMENT** by PHEME PERKINS, *Geoffrey Chapman, 1988, Pp. 350.*

This is the revised edition of a work first published in the USA in 1978. It deserves a wide readership for it will inform, sometimes provoke, often excite, occasionally infuriate, but always stimulate. It is a joy to enter into dialogue with it. That, however, is not its main purpose. Sub-titled, 'An introduction', its first chapter suggests that it is designed for real beginners since it really does begin at the beginning and takes nothing for granted. It ends (like every chapter) with a number of questions designed to put emphasis upon what is important and to lead on to further reflection which should make for a deeper discipleship. The idea behind the work is admirable and gives it a distinctiveness among N.T. introductions.

How effective though is its execution, and how valid is the approach which controls it? We take the latter question first. The work as a whole is written from the perspective of one who has taken on board much that has been offered by recent sociological and literary approaches to the New Testament. There are good chapters on 'the world of Jesus', 'the beginnings of Christianity' and 'the world of Paul'. What Perkins says is always interesting and often fascinating. The sociological approach is seen at its best in the treatment of Paul's letters to Thessalonica, Philippi, and Corinth. It is less successful with Galatians and Romans. Here, we need a bit more on Pauline theology. The apostle's thinking on the law, on justification by faith, and on the place of Israel in the divine plan of salvation needs to be tackled more systematically if the reader is to understand the heart of his message in these writings.

Again, one feels the need for more theological seriousness in her treatment of the gospels and their witness to Jesus. Here, the overall approach can be classified generally as one of a literary-critical kind. There are some excellent insights into the make-up, structure, and outlook of the

various gospels which free much that is in them to make an impact upon the modern reader. It is when Pheme Perkins passes through the level of a story to devote chapters to 'the Life of Jesus', the Preaching of Jesus', and 'the Resurrection of Jesus' that one's hesitations come to the fore. Real historical problems are not discussed with enough rigor to satisfy the reader. Perkins doesn't really come clean on these so that her discussion of the Resurrection opens insights and a way in to a possible approach only to leave one slightly stranded as to what really is the significance of the stories of the empty tomb.

There is a need of a more rigorous theology in some of the sections on 'the preaching of Jesus'. Perkins gives an excellent explanation of the significance of Jesus' eating with sinners. On the other hand, her explanation of Jesus' meaning in his teaching about lending to those who would borrow, and her contrast, of his attitude to Ben Sirah's seems naive and unresolved: 'This does not mean that Jesus was blind to the kind of human failings treated in Ben Sirah.... But Jesus' preaching springs from the presence of God's reign. It is not simply good advice about how to maintain one's integrity in a world of fools and less than honest people.' This sounds fine but it did not in fact help me when later in the day I was accosted with a demand that I should 'lend' some money to meet some less than clear need. I did not lend and I have no doubt that I was right not to. Dissatisfaction with the whole scenario was my lot. Jesus' preaching does indeed 'spring from the presence of God's reign' but just what does that mean? In what way is the kingdom present and in what way is its presence still limited? Here, theology—both that of Jesus and of us—needs more attention. It just will not do to mention the 'puzzling' saying of Mark 9<sup>1</sup> only to say, 'Jesus' contemporaries might have assumed that he meant that the final manifestation of the reign of God, judgment and new creation, was right round the corner.' The future dimension in Jesus' teaching as well as the reality of the present world need to be taken with more respect.

So, all in all a thoroughly stimulating way of reading the New Testament but one which needs a critical response even while the responder remains open to receive. I would hesitate to give it to a beginner: it is too difficult and too angled for that. But for the group leader who knows something about the subject already and who might hope to enthuse others, it is superb. To rekindle interest and to carry interest forward, it is excellent.

ERIC FRANKLIN

**JESUS: THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS** by John Bowden, *SCM*, London, 1988, pp. 259.

'This is a book of questions. They arise out of a wide variety of areas of Christian thought, practice and experience: study of the Bible, doctrine, ethics, the history of Christianity, liturgy, personal prayer, pastoral work, the use of Christian belief as a source of manipulation within society and the relationship between Christianity and other faiths...'

The author is an Anglican priest, who is also Editor and Managing Director of *SCM* Press. In the Preface, he makes a profession of faith in