

origins of his own thinking in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Jewish tradition.

The first part of the book surveys Buber's career, and offers summaries of his principal writings, composed over a period of sixty years. Pamela Vermes rightly sees the centre of his achievement in that brief but pregnant book, *I and Thou*, published in 1923. In an appendix, there is a thirty-page summary of the book in her own translation. She prefers to call it *I and You*, but while this certainly conforms to current usage, the surrender of the old intimate form of speech represents, in the opinion of this reviewer, an impoverishment of the English language.

It is in the second and third parts of the book that the rich results of the author's researches are principally to be found. There is much material here that will be unfamiliar to most of her readers, for she draws not only on the Bible but on Targum and Midrash and also very widely on the wisdom of the Hasidic teachers of Eastern Europe, who flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and had a great influence on Buber.

The root of Buber's teaching is traced to the divine name YHWH, which God revealed to Moses. This name has been traditionally associated with the Hebrew verb meaning 'to be', and has given rise to much speculation about God as the principle of Being or 'He Who Is'. Pamela Vermes traces an alternative way of interpreting the name as 'I am there' or 'I am there for you', that

is to say, as Presence or Helper. This is what Buber understands by 'The Eternal Thou' who is glimpsed in all genuine meeting as the pervasive ground of such meeting. The goal of human spirituality, the perfect man, is to realise and perfect the likeness to God that is already there in personal and interpersonal life. 'The perfect man is none other than the true helper' (p 150).

Buber, like most other thinkers, is stronger in what he affirms than in what he denies. Disillusioned with mysticism, he became a stern critic of the mystic's way to God, but his own teaching retains a mystical flavour, and not all mysticism ends in mere absorption. Again, while personal encounter takes precedence over ontological speculation, this does not entitle us to dispense with metaphysics, and Buber's own philosophy of life obviously rests on vast but undiscussed metaphysical foundations. Finally, the freedom of Buber's spirituality certainly releases people from the narrower constraints of institutional religion, but it is derived itself from a concrete historic tradition, and gives no warrant for the rejection or supersession of religion, in its particular embodiments.

This book will send many readers back to Buber, to explore further his wisdom and its significance for our times. But, apart from this, the book stands in its own right as a notable contribution towards a contemporary spirituality.

JOHN MACQUARRIE

**EXPLORATIONS IN THEOLOGY 7, by James Barr.**

**SCM Press 1980. pp x + 150. £4.50.**

James Barr's contribution to SCM's *Explorations in Theology* series consists of seven papers, all of which he has previously given as papers or as lectures, and most of which have already been published in various places. Their common concern is the Bible: the nature of the Bible as

a whole and of its contents, the kind of authority it has or should be accorded, and the ways in which it should and should not be read or studied.

From the titles of the various chapters, the book appears to cover quite a wide range of topics: there are chapters on the

way in which the Bible has influenced political thinking, whether academic biblical studies are the proper domain of committed Christians, as well as an attack on biblical fundamentalism and a discussion of the distinction to be made between story and history when seeking to understand the narrative portions of the Bible. But there is considerable overlap between the contents of these and other chapters. (This overlap sometimes takes the form of almost verbatim repetition, understandable given that the various papers were originally intended for different audiences, but somewhat annoying when read together; this could have been avoided by a little editing).

The fundamental theme that emerges from the book as a whole is that of the place of the Bible in the relationship between God and the believing community. The Bible should not be seen as the means whereby God imparts knowledge of himself to a people previously ignorant of him, nor as what makes possible a relation of faith to him. Rather, it emerges from an already existing relationship between God and people. It never introduces God, but presupposes that the reader already has some knowledge of him and faith in him, and it was written and compiled, edited and canonised by members of believing and worshipping communities. God's relationship is with a community, and it is out of that relationship that the Bible was produced: it does not itself mediate that relationship. As the product of a community of faith, it is wrong to think of it in isolation from that community; it expresses the community's faith and invites the reader to share it. To this extent, the Bible is on a par with the rest of the believing community's tradition, which also expresses its faith and is inspired by God. It is differentiated from the rest of the tradition by its canonical status. In forming a canon the community in effect decides that its subsequent tradition will centre round that canon: it will be a hermeneutical tradition. The fixing of the canon

marks this shift between creation and interpretation. It does not mark the end of inspiration, for it is basically the community, not the book, that is inspired by God.

Professor Barr's quarrel with the fundamentalists stems largely from their different view of the place of the Bible in the relationship between God and man. For the fundamentalists, the relation of faith is not one that precedes the Bible and originally produced it, but is rather totally dependent on it. On this view, faith in God is more or less equivalent to faith in the Bible, and naturally expresses itself as a belief in the complete inerrancy of the biblical text. This misconception of the place of the Bible has, according to Barr, all kinds of baneful consequences, not only for the personalities of the fundamentalists, reducing them to 'a strained, suspicious and exclusivist frame of mind ... a pathological personality structure' (p 69), but also for the way they treat the biblical text itself. There are many plain historical errors in the Bible, as well as internal contradictions. In order to preserve the historical inerrancy of the Bible the fundamentalists are forced to distort the obvious meaning of the text. Their preconceptions prevent them from looking openly at the text to see what it actually says: 'The problem of fundamentalism is that, far from being a biblical religion, an interpretation of Scripture in its own terms, it has evaded the natural and literal sense of the Bible in order to imprison it within a particular tradition of human interpretation' (p 79).

The question of inerrancy arises most starkly in connection with narrative sections of the Bible. Barr's position is that many of these belong to the genre not of history but of story. They are intended not to give an accurate record of what went on, but to get across a point, a point often relating not to the past but to the present or future. 'To seek to prove that these stories fit in with their historical setting and are therefore accurate, as if such fitting with the historical setting was the

ground for their authenticity and authority, is thus to miss the point entirely: to seek to ground the authority of the Bible in its accuracy as past history is often to break down its real authority altogether' (p 61). But can the point of a story, its significance for readers today, be so easily divorced from its accuracy as history? Barr writes: 'While on the surface narrating the past, the interest of the writers was often in the present and the future. Stories about Abraham were told, not in order to inform the reader how things had been in the second millenium, but in order to give pictures of the way in which the promise of God, which was yet to come, had been fulfilled – and therefore of how, for others much later, it might be fulfilled' (ibid.). But if the Abraham stories are not substantially accurate as history, then the promise of God was not fulfilled in the way that they propose, and if it was not in fact fulfilled in that way in the past, then there is no reason to suppose that it will be fulfilled in that way in the future, either. If the Abraham stories are perceived as historically false, then they lose their power to create and mould expectations about the future course of events. So it appears the fundamentalists have a point, after all, in insisting on the literal truth of the text, even if, as Barr says, they are forced in doing so to adopt unnatural interpretations of it.

This rather obvious point is perhaps answerable. The absence in Barr's book of any attempt to provide an answer is a serious omission, for the point threatens some

of his major positions: it appears to vitiate his attack on fundamentalism, to weaken the force of his distinction between story and history and to throw open again the question of the nature of the authority of the Bible and its place in the life of the believing community. There are as well other important omissions. Most notably, there is no discussion at all of the problem of what is to be taken as the meaning of a text, or whether it is possible to speak of *the* meaning of a text at all. Barr is confident that critical study will often be able to establish the 'true meaning' of a text, but does not make clear what he means by this; is the true meaning the meaning the author meant to convey, what would be understood by his contemporaries, that attached to it by later editors, by those who formed the canon, by early commentators or by modern believing communities (which ones?), or is it the sense that God intends it to convey to readers today? This is a large question, and an important one for Barr, for the answer one gives to it will determine the methods one uses to uncover the 'true meaning' of the biblical text. The critical method Barr espouses clearly presupposes a certain range of answers to the question, and rules out others. Both for its intrinsic importance to biblical study and because it has an important bearing on what Barr wants to say, some discussion of the problem should have been included.

GARETH MOORE O P

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION** by Brian Davies. *Oxford University Press*, 1982. pp x + 144. £9.95 hardback; £3.95 paperback.

This book is a concise and lucid introduction to all the main problems in the philosophy of religion. It consists of twelve chapters on the following topics: verification and falsification, theistic language, the problem of evil, the arguments for God's existence, religious experience, the divine attributes of eternity and omniscience, the relation between morality and religion, the concept of 'miracle', and life after death. There is also a good bibliography. Obviously anyone who seeks to

cover so large an area in such a brief scope is bound to be selective. But I think that Dr Davies has made the right selection and presented the topics he has chosen in an appropriate order. Some readers may be surprised that out of all the divine attributes he has chosen 'eternity' and 'omniscience'. Yet I think he was wise to do so; for these are the attributes that are apt to provoke the most philosophical disagreement. Inevitably there are points at which any reviewer would wish that Davies had