

Foreword

T.R.Henn (1901-1974) was an Irishman whose family home in County Clare (it was called Paradise) is lovingly described in his autobiography, *Five Arches* (1980). His youth was exposed to the political and social turbulence that preceded the creation of the Irish Free State – the same turbulence which figures prominently in the work of W.B. Yeats, a poet on whom Tom Henn was to become an authority and in whose beloved region of Sligo he himself was born. His own career took him from the Indian Civil Service to membership of the English Faculty at the University of Cambridge and to a fellowship of St Catharine's College, where he played an important role as Senior Tutor and Director of Studies in English. A wise, challenging and greatly respected teacher, he was a man of diverse interests, with a far broader range of experience than is enjoyed nowadays by those who have to fight their way up the narrow ladder of academic promotion. Tom Henn was indeed among the last of a line for whom scholarship was enriched by experience in other fields of activity, serving as he did in the Second World War with the rank of Brigadier. His complex personality was at once formidable and generous; it was always stimulating to be in his company and one usually learned something then that one did not know before.

His breadth of knowledge lends a distinctive quality to his various books, no less evident in *The Lonely Tower* (1950), a masterly study of the personal and cultural sources of the poetry of Yeats, than in *The Harvest of Tragedy* (1956) and *The Apple and the Spectroscope* (1951), a short but illuminating discussion of the relationship between science and the arts; while his final book, *The Living Image*

(1972) brought a wealth of practical experience to an examination of the sporting imagery in the poems and plays of Shakespeare. So too in *The Bible as Literature* (1970) we can see the fruit not only of his biblical studies but also of his own personal experience, his concern with moral values and poet's awareness of the perennial and paradoxical challenges involved in being human. This book was indeed an undertaking close to its author's heart and to his beliefs.

Although its title might seem to indicate a possible trivialising of its subject, *The Bible as Literature* is a pondered and well-informed celebration of the significant role played by literary factors in the total impact that the Bible has had upon the English-speaking world. English-speaking, for it is the King James Bible of 1611 which provides the principal textual basis for this study. Tom Henn was steeped in the poetry and prose of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and not the least valuable aspect of his book is its demonstration of how the literary sensibility of a particular time was to shape the language of the Biblical writers as it has come to sound in English ears. The regular quotations from George Herbert, Milton, Donne and Shakespeare greatly enrich the author's text; nor are the citations confined to the seventeenth century – Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and, as one might expect, W.B. Yeats, are all quoted in support of his contentions and elucidations,

As Henn acknowledges, he owed much to George Adam Smith's eloquent and learned study, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (1894), which provides its readers with a vivid sense of the ecological factors shaping the conditions under which the various Biblical writers set down their national traditions and beliefs. Henn's own approach is likewise rooted in physical actuality, being that of a man who, for example was well aware of the hazards attending an army on the march. Accordingly when discussing the wholesale slaughter of Israel's enemies, he will point out that while an empire might afford to take captives, 'the Israelites had no great city, and no adequate organisation to deal with prisoners. Therefore, as a purely practical measure, the army had to be put to the sword. . . .' Such an approach is likewise found in Henn's account of the song of Deborah, where he points out that the defeat of Sisera's forces

was 'the first time, in this intermittent warfare, that infantry had triumphed over armour.' No less illuminating is the description of the various literary conventions employed by the biblical writers. The reading of the tale of Saul and David as being a classic instance of tragedy; the contention that much of the Old Testament is an epic; the examination of Hebrew verse structure in the Psalms, and of the wisdom literature's use of gnomic aphorisms; the analysis of St Paul's employment of formal rhetoric in sermons and epistles; and of the pastoral imagery and metaphors to be found in the parables of Jesus – all these serve to liberate the Scriptural text from restrictive liturgical and ecclesiological associations and to evoke the spirit that informs the Biblical canon as a whole.

Henn's prose style is always accessible and courteous to his readers: one notes his characteristic use of the turn of phrase 'we may', so delicately indicating the breadth of his own learning. And there are frequent examples of robust common sense, as when in discussing the detailed directions for blood sacrifice, he observes that 'civilised western man would be revolted by these descriptions if he had to carry out all his own arrangements for butchering his animal food.' But the supreme merit of this book is the way in which it relates the Biblical writings to other forms of art than the purely literary, forms pictorial, sculptural, poetic, for in doing so it throws light on the importance of the human imagination's role as a shaping element in religious apprehension: it confirms the belief that spirituality is innate in humankind. But let the author speak for himself: bringing this enlightening study to a close he claims that the Bible 'invites the response of all great literature: wonder, delight, exaltation. . . . It becomes one with the western tradition, because it is its single greatest source.' That word 'response' implies the existence of a reality that elicits one: in *The Bible as Literature* the claims of sacred inspiration and of imaginative conviction can be seen to coalesce and thus to be indispensable to each other's authenticity.

Glen Cavaliero