

How 'faith speaks to faith' in the New Testament

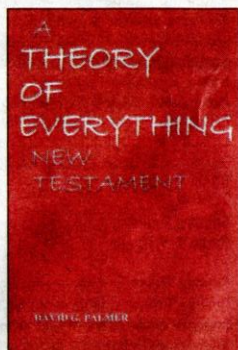
SOME readers will have visited Masada, the place where the Great Jewish Revolt of AD68-73 came to its bloody conclusion as the Roman army stormed the desert plateau where the last Jewish forces were holding out. Others will have been to present-day Jerusalem and seen how little survived its capture and destruction by the Romans in AD 70. Why mention this? Because David Palmer in his book, **A Theory of Everything New Testament** (Cerdwen Press, 46 Regent Street, Church Gresley DE11 9PL, £11.45), is convinced that our first Gospel, Mark, was written after the catastrophe which destroyed the second city of the Roman Empire and the slaughter, famine and destitution which followed, killing up to four per cent of the empire's population.

For Palmer, this is the vital context in which Mark's Gospel, a radically new kind of Christian document, was written. In this fascinating book he explores the links between the Pauline letters, which precede it, and the canonical writings that follow it. By bringing together both the context and content of the New Testament, as he understands them, he offers us a "theory of everything" in the New Testament.

Beginning with an overview of 100 years of when, why and how our Gospels came into being, he challenges many of the assumptions that have been widely put forward, often with little debate, by scholars and preachers alike.

Most commentaries state

Book review by J Colin Smith



that Mark's Gospel was written in AD 68 in the shadow of the forthcoming Jewish Revolt and about four years after the death of St Peter and St Paul. It is often surmised that the reason for the writing of Mark's Gospel is the death of the first generation of Christians and the apostles. Palmer, however, is convinced that internal evidence in the Gospel reveals that it was written to answer the question posed by the events of AD 70, "Where was the God of the Jews in this?" Had God given up on his people - both Jews and Christians?

The Gospel drama Mark produced, written in everyday Greek, was an invitation to both Jews and gentiles to recognise that God had brought the Old Covenant to completion and established through Jesus a New Covenant with the world. Despite the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent death and misery, the Gospel reveals

God's Kingdom shown in power, judgment and grace.

He also addresses the important question as to the source of the material in Mark's Gospel. In opposition to scholars like C F D Moule who believed that the Gospel is based on eye-witness testimony, Palmer contends that the writer of Mark's Gospel depended on the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Scriptures; on the Letters of Paul more than any link with Peter, though he allows for a Petrine link; and on his own creativity. Finally, he provides new structure, form and content to what he received from these sources.

Using Mark's Gospel as their primary source document, Palmer believes that the writers of Matthew and Luke created their own Gospels, each with a distinct purpose. Matthew wrote a Gospel for the Jews and Luke for the gentiles. Traditionally, it has been posited that there must have been a document or documents, often call Q, containing their additional material. Palmer believes that the writers of Matthew and Luke depended largely upon their rearrangement of Mark; their editing and their own creative writing, in order to fulfil their purpose. He dates the first three Gospels between AD70 and 80 and John's Gospel, also written with an awareness of Mark, at the early date of around 85 AD.

In opposition to J N Sander's contention that "the desire to produce fine writing as something worthwhile in itself are foreign to (the New

Testament's) authors", Palmer discerns, within the whole gamut of the New Testament writings, the rhythms of Homer's Greek. Their use of classical rhythm and rhetoric is a sign that they were aware of the importance of their writings while providing a practical aid to those who wanted to memorise them.

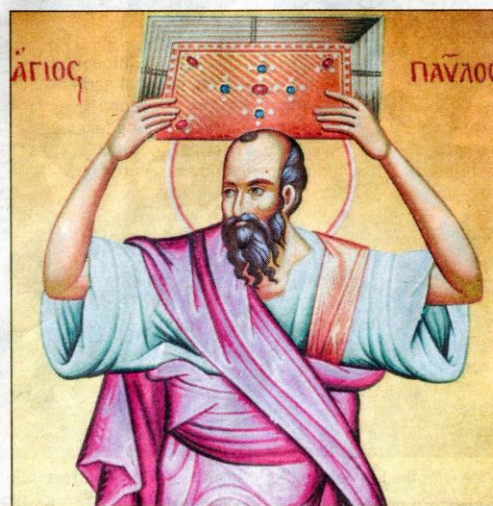
He writes of the internal structure he finds in the New Testament writings, a subject on which he has written at length in his other books. Thus, each of the Gospels has a structure which is appropriate to its theme and purpose. For instance, the writer of Matthew produces a five-section presentation which deliberately mimics the pattern of the Five Books of the Law of the Old Covenant.

Though this A4-sized book is not long, it is the result of more than 35 years of re-

search since David Palmer's days at Wesley House, Cambridge, much of which has been published elsewhere. His latest work contains important challenges to scholars and non-specialists alike because he seeks to relate the several contexts and contents which bind the New Testament together.

He feels we have often accepted traditions about our fundamental documents without due scrutiny and offers us a fresh way of recognising how faith speaks to faith in the pages of the New Testament. **A Theory of Everything New Testament** is exciting and challenging. It exists to be tested by others and I look forward to hearing and reading the response of others to this significant book!

The Rev J Colin Smith is a supernumerary minister in the Mid Derbyshire circuit.



Books in Brief

by Cavan Wood

THE strapline of **A Call to Act** by Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams (David C Cook, £11.24) is "Every action can make a difference". And the authors subtitle their book "Building a poverty-busting lifestyle", which is a challenge to all of us. With a good slew of inspiring stories, they help us to think about how we might change the way we live. They give us practical suggestions as to how we can help others in need. They ask us searching questions and show the Christian urgency of this call to live better. It can be summed up in the phrase, "We must live more simply, so that others might simply live." A thoughtful book to read, a difficult one to live out!

SUBTITLED "A story of a quiet confidence in a good God", **Led to the Banquet Hall** by Gilana Yong (Instant Apostle, £9.99) is part autobiography and part reflection on the nature of the spiritual life. The author, who suffered trauma and abuse, writes movingly about the need to discover the love of God and the power of forgiveness. She has had a wide range of jobs, including starting a bookshop, being a priest and working in a hospice. The two thoughtful questionnaires that she has used in her care of the dying would be good prompts for a day of personal reflection for anyone.

Cavan Wood is a lay reader in the Church of England.