

REVIEWS

THE EPISTLES OF JOHN: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, by Raymond E Brown. *Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1982. pp xxvii + 812. £19.95.*

This is a recent volume of the Anchor Bible. It complements Professor Brown's distinguished two-volume commentary on the Gospel (1966) in the same series, and in part fills out the interesting complex delineation of the Johannine circle that appeared in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979). It is immensely long (equivalent to more than six pages for each verse) and one begins to wonder what is happening to commentaries – especially on a somewhat secondary and rather repetitive set of writings. Professor Brown himself does not regard them (by themselves) as masterpieces: they are grammatically obscure, not clearly presented, and (though commending love) are written in an unloving spirit. Yet because the conflict between the Johannine writer and his opponents arises from divergent understanding of the Johannine tradition, these epistles provide important, though contestable, evidence about the community's history.

The translation is fairly plain and literal. Each section is provided with lengthy detailed Notes which discuss grammatical problems, Johannine usage (more fully than space allowed in the commentary on the Gospel), and the opinions of numerous authorities. These sets of Notes are clearly for the information of students and the appraisal of scholars. After the Notes for each section there follows the Comment, where Professor Brown judiciously arbitrates and tells his readers what he thinks the meaning of the section must be. If the non-technical reader is content to read only the Comments, he will have a continuous exegesis of reasonable length – somewhat over 200 pages. There are five appendices containing summarising charts and matters of subsidiary interest. There is an almost overwhelming amount of bibliographical information – so much so that one wonders whether the commentator

has really succeeded in freeing his own acute intelligence from the academic discussion and has applied it single-handedly to the Johannine text. It is a marvellous survey of what has been said up till now, and an assessment of it – but does it round off a period of discussion or start a new one?

The full introduction presents conclusions which are argued for in the course of the commentary. Professor Brown believes that 1 John was written after the tradition of the Gospel had taken shape (a view I myself can accept only with reservations), and he is opposed to source theories (as I am too). He thinks that there was one group of adversaries who had adopted a too high christology (though I am glad to find him somewhat embarrassed in presenting that view), who were indifferent to morality (but surely only when regarded from the one-sided position of the epistolary writer), and they are not to be identified with known heretics (I agree, and hope that we may have seen the last of the docetists who anachronistically haunt much exegesis). When Professor Brown, holding as he does the view that the writer of 1 John knew the Gospel or something very like it, sets out the respective positions of the writer and the secessionists, he is forced (it seems to me) into some very subtle arguments. The epistolary writer, he thinks, is reviving an outmoded christology instead of following the implications of the Gospel. He appears more archaic than the Gospel because he is recovering ancient tradition: for example, his eschatology is a revival of an ancient stratum. It is observed that the secessionists could draw all their ideas from the tradition of the Gospel; but one can reply to Professor Brown's observation by saying that so they could if the Gospel had been composed, in part at least, to take account of insights that were valid in the contentions of the secession-

ists. The point of divergence, Professor Brown suggests, between the two contestants, was the salvific value of Jesus' career in the flesh. The secessionists contested his coming in the flesh because it was not essential to his being Christ, the Son of God. But in my view that neither goes far enough nor follows quite the right line. The secessionists had no doubt that Jesus had come in the flesh, but once they had received the Spirit and the consequent gift of prophecy they saw no further reason to be interested in Jesus. If by the Spirit they had direct access to the Father, why should they bother about the Son of the Father, for were they themselves not born of God? The epistolary writer has little interest in the Spirit; how could he have read the Gospel which speaks so powerfully about the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth?

And every reference to the Paraclete makes his arrival and function subordinate to Jesus the Son.

In many ways Professor Brown's case is worked out with much ingenuity. Logically it is not impossible, but to my mind it finally fails to carry conviction. It is like an old-fashioned detective story where a dramatic and complex theory is confidently put forward by the great authority – and turns out to be the wrong solution. If the writer of 1 John was not reviving archaic forms *after* the Gospel had appeared but was contributing to the growth of the Gospel tradition, a clearer and more probable solution is available.

But of course every library must buy this fine book, and every student must be storn-minded enough to consult it.

KENNETH GRAYSTON

THE VON BALTHASAR READER. Edited by Medard Kohl and Werner Löser. T. & T. Clark, 1983, pp xiv + 439. £14.95.

T. and T. Clark are beginning to do for Balthasar what they so famously did for Barth. This volume serves as an excellent point of orientation for anyone about to plunge into the thickets of *Herrlichkeit* in the translation (*The Glory of the Lord*) which the same publishers have sponsored, and whose first volume also appears this year. The selection of texts is admirable – predictably so, as it is made by two very considerable experts on Balthasar's work (Löser will be familiar to some as author of a major study of Balthasar's use of the Fathers): it originally included some texts from *Herrlichkeit*, but the translators have omitted these in view of the forthcoming English version. And it is good to have so much from the second great multi-volume work, *Theodramatik*, still in progress (vol. III has appeared since this collection was first assembled) and relatively unknown in this country.

Balthasar is a writer rich in allusions, and a volume which noted all of these would be twice the length of the present one. But one resonance which might be missed, and which is illuminating for grasp-

ing what he is generally trying to say, can be found on p 122. Christian eschatology cannot be a promise of 'explanation'; its purpose is to change the world from the starting point of a realization in concrete historical terms of the 'end' in our midst. Balthasar says of eschatology what Marx says of philosophy; and we shall not fully understand Balthasar if we fail to see how his work is conditioned by the same repudiation of 'absolute knowledge' as the ideal for humanity. The essence of faith for him is, indisputably, transforming action, and the 'text' on which theology reflects is the history of Christ and his saints as agents and generators of transformation. There are some striking pages here on the Christian's responsibility in the world, even on the spiritual/theological ambiguity of non-violence (pp 123, 368-75, etc.). If Balthasar has the reputation of being a sharp critic of political ideologies, it is not because his stance is in any way pietistic so much as because he is almost obsessed with the *irresoluble* nature of political conflict. The return, again and again, to the revealed *Gestalt* of Jesus is a way of saying that the