

TRADITIO-HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF THE GOSPELS (Studies in Creative Criticism, 4) by R. S. Barbour. *SPCK, London, 1972. 54 pp. 75p.*

This is one of those rare books which ought to be much longer. Professor Barbour has a lot to say about a wide variety of issues, but never quite enough space to say enough on any one. The book is full of apologies for abruptly ending discussions that have barely begun, because of the necessity of passing on to the next topic. As a result the reader will probably finish the book breathless, and a little confused.

The first half of the book is spent in analysing the techniques used by exegetes to establish which gospel sayings are 'authentic', in the sense of deriving from Jesus himself. He concentrates on what is normally called 'the criterion of dissimilarity'. This enables one to put aside, at least initially, any material which has close parallels in first-century Judaism, and whatever may be explained by reference to the 'faith situation' of the early church. In theory one should now be left with what was distinctive of Jesus' original message. One may then apply Perrin's 'criterion of coherence', which allows one to accept back whatever is compatible with this hard core of genuine material. Barbour demonstrates effectively that it is very hard to use these criteria objectively, especially as they assume that we are moving from the known (i.e. first-century Judaism and the early church) to the unknown (i.e. what Jesus actually said). In fact the results that different scholars get depend upon the prior hypotheses that they hold with regard to first-century Judaism and the early church. Furthermore, if these criteria are used as the basic tools for coming to a knowledge of the 'historical Jesus', then inevitably we end up with a Jesus who is distinctive, but not in the way that the early church believed. The 'criterion of dissimilarity' will reject almost all the sayings of Jesus which refer to his forthcoming death, or his messiahship, since it is in these areas that the church's preaching is most likely to have moulded the material. The sayings of the 'historical Jesus' will be devoid of kerygma and christology. A gulf is opened up between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'risen Christ', and it must inevitably appear as if the early church has betrayed and misunderstood Jesus.

The consequence that Barbour draws is that though these criteria are useful, they cannot provide the basis for establishing a portrait of the historical Jesus; we must discover other and better tools. Thus far Barbour's arguments appear sound.

The second half of the book is so concentrated that it is hard to summarize and indeed, sometimes, to understand. Having discussed the basic methods of traditio-historical criticism, Barbour wishes to examine the function that they ought to have within an attempt to interpret the gospels. He works at the problems caused by the distinction between 'the historical Jesus' and the 'risen Christ' in terms of different theories of historicity. The first is the idealist theory which accepts a statement as true if it coheres with other true statements. One is then faced with the problem of how to choose between mutually incompatible sets of statements. The second theory is realist and demands that true statements correspond with 'the facts': but how does one test whether a statement actually does correspond with the facts? Barbour concludes that any viable theory of historicity must combine elements of both. The Bultmannian position is fundamentally idealist in that the 'true Christ' is the one who reveals the possibility of authentic existence. 'The real Christ is the preached Christ', in the words of Kähler. The stress on encounter with this 'preached Christ', and consequent re-interpretation of one's own self-understanding, adds a tinge of 'realism' to this position. The search for the 'historical Jesus' is rejected as irrelevant, since he is encountered not through faith but through contingent historical methods that vary from age to age, and thus cannot provide a stable basis for faith.

Some theologians suspect that this position leaves one floating in a world of 'inner reality' which must be validated by a return to the historical Jesus, but because of the traditio-historical methods that they use, this 'historical Jesus' replaces the 'risen Christ', witnessed to by the New Testament. Our exegetical methods have opened up a gulf between 'the

historical Jesus' and the 'risen Christ', and the temptation is either to reject the former as irrelevant, or the latter as deceptive.

Barbour seeks a *via media*, which he finds exemplified in Käsemann's latest book, 'Jesus Means Freedom'. Käsemann sees that in the gospels, history and faith are so entangled that one cannot accept a polarization between Jesus and Christ, because we cannot infer an historical Jesus who can be put over against the portraits which the gospels present. But we can use our methods of traditio-historical criticism to understand the impact which Jesus' life, death and resurrection had on the early church, and help us to interpret the gospel portraits of Jesus Christ. Our faith statements will have historical implications, but this is a risk which every Christian must be prepared to take.

All this is fine, but perhaps Barbour leaves the really important questions unexamined. Käsemann clearly feels free to draw much more widely and uncritically on the gospel material than many other authors, but why? Is it

because as an historian he feels that we have been unduly pessimistic about the historicity of the gospel narratives, or is it because as a theologian he feels that we have been failing to respect the Canon of Scripture as inspired? If it is the former, then it is not clear that Barbour has shown us any real reasons for being more optimistic, but if it is the latter, then Barbour has not even begun to examine the crucial question, which is: What type of truth claim are we making for the gospels if we say that they are inspired? The real weakness of the second half of this book is that Barbour is trying to discuss what is ultimately a theological question in terms that are drawn from the philosophy of religion. These terms may be relevant, but they cannot provide us with our starting point. Perhaps it is unfair to judge Barbour too severely on the basis of such a short work; in which case one can only hope that he will find the opportunity to expound his views at greater length.

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, O.P.

ISAIAH 1-12, by Otto Kaiser (Old Testament Library). *SCM Press*, 1972. 170 pp. £2.50.

This continuous commentary on the first twelve chapters of Isaiah is workmanlike but readable. It is intelligible to the general reader, informative and not overloaded with footnotes on obscure controversial matters of interest only to the expert (who would in any case find them more satisfactorily discussed in specialist monographs). A feature of this series, translated from *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, is the refusal to clog the beginning with an introduction; this has advantages, but one does miss some statements of position, and especially discussion of such important points as the authorship of the book as a whole.

The central point of interest in a commentary on these chapters must be the interpretation of the 'Book of Immanuel', chapters 7-12. The author rejects all attempts to identify the child whom the maiden will conceive as a sign to Ahaz in chapter 7, and goes back behind the LXX translation 'virgin', rendering 'if a young woman, who is now pregnant, bear a son . . .'. The oracle is to be understood as a promise that before women (in general) who are now pregnant bear their sons the danger from the invaders will have passed. This interpretation is thoroughly possible linguistically, and does solve a lot of problems. The oracle continues with a prophecy of doom, occasioned by Ahaz'

refusal of a sign, which is a refusal to commit himself to faith: the land will eventually be devastated, so that prices rise astronomically and consumer goods become almost unobtainable; the remnant of the people will live on the nomadic food of milk and honey, considerably less attractive than it was to the wanderers in the desert. Kaiser does not remark that this food, though it has its drawbacks, is symbolically both a promise for the future and the pledge of a return to the days of primitive purity and sincerity in Israel's early life. In line with the uncompromising rejection of Ahaz, the 'Unto us a son is born' is interpreted not of the birth of the promised child, nor indeed of any child, certainly not of David's line; it is a promise of a future enthronement of a king, drawing (as *Ps* 2.7 does) on the Egyptian ritual of the new birth of the king as the son of god at his enthronement; hence the exalted titles which follow. This view is less commanding than the Immanuel-interpretation, though certainly attractive; as it stands, however, it hardly does justice to the dignity of the divine titles conferred on the prince in the same verse; these are, significantly, somewhat played down in the commentary. Consistently with the view so far taken of the bankruptcy of Ahaz' line, the sprig from the root of Jesse is