

ISAIAH 13-39, by Otto Kaiser (Old Testament Library). *SCM Press*, London, 1974. 412 pp. £5.75.

This volume completes the Old Testament Library commentaries on Isaiah, the other two volumes being Isaiah 1-12 by Kaiser, and Isaiah 40-66 by Klaus Westermann. For many people this is the least devotional part of Isaiah, having neither the thrill of the Book of Emmanuel nor the presage of the Suffering Servant songs, but being very largely taken up with the oracles against the nations and eschatological promises which do not seem too relevant now that we have settled in to the era of the new covenant. Traditionally these chapters (with the exception of 24-27 and 34-35) are ascribed directly to the prophet Isaiah, not merely to his school, as are the later chapters in the book of Isaiah.

Probably the most interesting feature of Kaiser's commentary, at any rate to one comparatively ignorant of Isaianic studies, is the widespread questioning of this assumption. To begin with, the stories about Isaiah at the end of this part (36-39), taken from the Book of Kings, 'are of no importance for the knowledge of the historical activity of the prophet' (p. ix), since they are in conflict with what we know of Hezekiah (p. 368) and of the history of the Assyrian invasions. They are legends, based on a good deal of circumstantial knowledge, so probably pre-exilic. It is, however, the view given of the prophecies themselves which is infinitely more fascinating. No one would today dispute that over the ages in which the prophecies were read in the Jewish liturgy they were meditated and re-interpreted by means of minor additions (most obvious are the prose additions to poetic passages). Once the presumption is questioned that a particular passage is from Isaiah the floodgates are open. Convincing reasons can be given why 19.16ff cannot be long before the second century when Jews were settled on a basis of equality in Egypt and had an open, proselytising outlook (p. 111 is interesting on why this tendency withered away): the poem in 32.1-8 expresses a wisdom attitude which must also be sought

about this time (p. 329); the superb taunt on the death of a king (14.4b-21) could have been intended as well for Alexander as for Sargon II (p. 30).

Being composed across the centuries, this part of the book of Isaiah gives a continuous series of glimpses of Israel's oppression and hope. With all kinds of rich poetry and imagery Israel cries to the Lord as blow succeeds blow and misery gives way to misery, as one nation follows another in despoiling the Lord's people and treading them under foot. It is a marvellous story of perseverance, as this series of anonymous prophets in the tradition of Isaiah take up their master's themes and use his imagery to express their own undaunted hope in the eventual destruction of their enemies. Kaiser always succeeds in drawing some homiletic application for the present day from each passage, but to me it is the sweep of history which is most moving. As nations lost their identity, and a fortiori their national gods, under the upheavals caused by the great world empires, one nation alone held firm: far from diminishing, her hope grew and broadened into a conviction that Yahweh held sway over the whole universe and all its powers.

One may find fault with individual views, for instance Kaiser hardly brings sufficient evidence for denying 28. 1-4 to the prophet Isaiah (p. 237), but the persuasiveness of the general picture is equalled only by its clarity. One continually comes across attractive interpretations: the haunting but seemingly pointless oracle 'Watchman, what of the night?' is interpreted as a figure of hope for the night of oppression to end (p. 131). The gibberish 'Sav laSav, Oav laOav' is seen as a teacher spelling out the alphabet (p. 245). In general the author succeeds in bringing to life what might otherwise seem a dead and dreary desert of imprecations against nations long forgotten.

HENRY WANSBRUGH

JESUS THE JEW: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels, by Geza Vermes. *Collins*, London, 1973. 286 pp. £3.15.

THIS IS MY GOD: The Jewish Way of Life, by Herman Wouk. *Collins*, London, 1973. 320 pp. £2.75.

Non-extant or non-existent scrolls lie behind *The Secret Gospel*, *The Jesus Scroll* and *Mark of the Law*, popular studies which have recently followed in the wake of Irving Stone's *The Word*. In contrast to these efforts to derive

insights from arcane sources, Dr Vermes's aim is to place the Gospel accounts of Jesus within the framework of what is known of the history, institutions, languages, culture and literature of Israel, both in Palestine and the