



ISAIAH

John J. Bimson reviews an important new contribution to the literature on the Book of Isaiah.

The Book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39,

John N. Oswalt

NICOT series, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, 746 pp., £26.60 hardback, ISBN 0-8028-2368-8.

This is the first part of a two-volume commentary on Isaiah, which promises to be the weightiest to come from a single author for some time.

The Introduction (pp. 3-76) relates to the whole of the book of Isaiah, and (among other things) sets out Oswalt's approach to questions of date, authorship and unity. Oswalt argues persuasively for a unity of thought running through the whole 66 chapters, and deplores the failure of most recent scholarship and exegesis to interpret the book as a whole. 'It is only in its wholeness that the grandeur of the book's message can be seen' (p. 23). Furthermore, 'only a holistic interpretation of Isaiah will permit it to have its correct function in the canon', that function being as a bridge between the truths revealed in the Old and New Testament eras, 'between the Already and the Not Yet', (p. 53).

This unity of thought is for Oswalt a compelling argument for unity of authorship. This will not be equally compelling to everyone, of course, and scholars convinced of the book's multiple authorship have also perceived such a unity (e.g. Clements, Childs, Brueggemann). But Oswalt believes that the unity is the work of Isaiah ben Amoz himself. This does not mean, however, that for Oswalt every word of the present book is from his hand. He suggests that the book should be viewed as 'an anthology of many different materials coming from a variety of different settings in the prophet's life . . . assembled together according to an overall literary and theological grid, either by the prophet himself or by his immediate followers' (pp. 44-5). The emphasis in this last phrase is on the word 'immediate', for it is essential to Oswalt's view that there was no prolonged editorial activity behind the formation of the book, and that Isaiah ben Amoz himself directed its shape. (He refers on p. 26 to these same 'followers' of Isaiah as 'those working with him').

On the other hand, unlike some conservative scholars, who have tried to read chs. 40-66 (in whole or in part) against the background of the late eighth or early seventh century BC, Oswalt accepts that 'Chs. 40-55 seem to be offering hope to a people yet in exile, while chs. 56-66 appear to speak to a returned people who face both old and new problems' (p. 13). Hence Oswalt's outline of the historical background to the book covers the events of 739-400 BC.

As Oswalt admits, this matter of historical contexts is 'the most serious objection in attribution of the materials in chs. 40-66 to Isaiah. It is certainly not typical for the prophets to address themselves at length to times other than their own' (p. 26). However, he goes on to claim that the phenomenon is not really so rare as some have stated, citing Ezk. 37-48, Dn. 7-11 and Zch. 8-13 as examples of the same sort of thing. Whether these are really valid examples of address to specific future generations (rather than, primarily, predictions of the future addressed to the prophet's contemporaries or to those living in the interim periods) is a

very moot point. Furthermore, Oswalt himself has to confess 'that the material in Isaiah is unusually extensive and unusually suited to the specific historical context in the future' (pp. 26-7). His suggested explanation for this phenomenon is essentially that chs. 40-66 were necessary to complete the message of 1-39. This, of course, begs some major questions. Would not other prophetic books have to be regarded as 'incomplete' if judged by the same criteria? Is it not, in fact, usual for a later prophet to modify and fill out a message adumbrated by a predecessor? Why was Isaiah under a unique obligation to leave no loose ends? I raise this issue because it seems to me that conservative scholarship has yet to combine convincingly the unity of the book's authorship with the evident diversity of historical contexts addressed. Unless this can be done the case for unity of authorship will always suffer from an inherent weakness. Oswalt's attempt to answer this problem is, however, one of the best and most honest so far.

Regardless of whether readers are convinced by Oswalt's case for unity of authorship, they will find his approach to the book as a unity in terms of its structure and message very illuminating and helpful. It is Oswalt's conviction that 'the overarching theme of the book of Isaiah is servanthood' (p. 54). Chs. 1-5 are seen as an introduction to the book as a whole. They present the problem with which the rest of the book is concerned: Israel, chosen to be the servant of God, is arrogant, proud and sinful; how then can she fulfil her role? Ch. 6 contains the answer in embryo, for here the prophet does what Israel needs to do: he recognises his helplessness, receives God's grace, and so is able to respond with obedience and trust. The rest of the book fleshes this out. Chs. 7-39 speak of the majesty and sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of his people (cf. 6:1-5); 40-55 show that God is able and willing to deliver his people (cf. 6:6-8), and deal with that people's motivation and power to serve Him; 56-66 show what it means to be God's servant in an imperfect and unreceptive world (cf. 6:9-13), contrasting divine ability with human inability, and climaxing with God's ability to glorify himself through his servant-people in the sight of the world.

Being only the first of two volumes, the present work does not give us all the material necessary to judge whether this analysis stands up to a thorough scrutiny. It is probably inevitable that in a book as long as Isaiah, and containing such a wealth and range of materials, more than one analysis can be plausibly defended. Indeed, a very different organising theme has recently been proposed by another supporter of the book's unity (W. J. Dumbrell, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 [1985], who sees God's concern with the city of Jerusalem as the overmastering theme). Oswalt himself admits that not everything in the three main sections of the book of Isaiah fits neatly into his categories. Nevertheless he believes that his analysis fairly represents the bulk of the materials in each section.

In the case of chs. 1-39 we are, of course, in a position to assess the fruits of Oswalt's analysis, and these are impressive. After the introductory chs. 1-5 and the pivotal ch. 6 (placed where it is for theological, not chronological,

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reasons), chs. 7-39 are seen to consist of 13-35 framed by two historical segments: 7-12 and 36-39. Chs. 13-35 function to demonstrate the trustworthiness of God: his glory transcends that of any of the nations, he can deliver His people from the nations, and it is therefore foolish to trust the nations in place of God. A recurring theme of chs. 7-39 as a whole is shown to be trust, and the two historical segments are crucial to this theme. Rather than being a more or less unfortunate insertion from 2 Kings, chs. 36-39 are seen to be of vital importance when a more holistic view is adopted. (Indeed Oswalt argues in an excursus that the Isaiah account, rather than the Kings account, may be primary). Some significant similarities and contrasts are demonstrated between 7-12 and 36-39, such that the two segments are obviously intended to balance each other. In each case a king of Judah faces a terrible threat, and has to make the choice of trusting either God or the nations; in each case the challenge is posed at the same spot – the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field (7:3; 36:2) – thus emphasising the relationship between the two segments. Ahaz trusts human might instead of God, and the Assyrian menace which Isaiah predicts as a result (7:17; 8:7-8) is fulfilled in the threat which faces his successor. However, Hezekiah makes the opposite choice and puts his trust in God. But Hezekiah's trust is imperfect (ch. 39), removing any suspicion that he might be the Messiah-king predicted in chs. 7-12. Thus ch.

39 directs us towards chs. 40-55 for clarification of the Messiah's nature, as well as pointing to the Babylonian exile which forms the background to those chapters.

This framework allows Oswalt to elucidate the theological message of Isaiah's first 39 chapters with a powerful clarity (and often with some practical application). Indeed, this is above all a solidly theological commentary. Textual and historical matters are discussed, in detail where necessary, but they do not obscure the commentary's theological intentions. Discussions of textual matters are mostly to be found in the ample footnotes to Oswalt's own translation. Oswalt's grip on historical issues is not always as strong as it might be. He seems unaware of the recent attribution to Sennacherib of a text comprising two fragments previously assigned to Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II (see N. Na'aman in *BASOR* 214 [1974], pp. 26-28), and appears to contradict himself over the occasion of the battle at Eltekeh (*after* the siege of Lachish, as on p.11, or *before* it, as on p. 632?). But such things detract little from the value of an otherwise masterly treatment of Isaiah's times and message.

Finally, it is good to find the volume thoroughly indexed. This is an important and helpful feature in a work of this size, and we must be grateful that we do not have to wait until the publication of vol. 2 for an index to the whole work.

LOGOS

Witness to the Word: a Commentary on John I
Karl Barth

Edited by Walther Fürst; translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eerdmans/Paternoster, Grand Rapids/Exeter, 1986, xii + 163 pp., £8.85; ISBN 0-8028-0186-2.

The contents of this work were delivered as lectures in the Universities of Münster (1925) and (in a revised form) Born (1933). The work was first published in German in 1976, as an exposition of the first eight chapters of John; the English translation is confined to the first chapter. By far the greater part of the translation consists of a verse-by-verse exegesis of the Greek text of the prologue; the remainder of the chapter is dealt with cursorily in two short chapters, devoted respectively to verses 19-34 and 35-51.

It used to be thought that Barth taught that scripture *becomes* the Word of God only as it is heard or read in faith. A corrective to this impression is given in his introduction to the lectures: canonical scripture, he says, is 'a Word which even before we could hear it has opened a dialogue with us, a dialogue which, because it is conducted in the name of God, we cannot escape' (p. 5).

One turns to a number of *cruces interpretum* in the prologue to see what Barth made of them. Verse 2 is not a superfluous repetition of the first two clauses of verse 1: the initial *houtos* does not mean 'the same' (as in AV) but (if it be unpacked) 'the one in whom we have come to know the Word, Jesus, the Word made flesh'. As for the punctuation at the end of verse 3, to place the period after *oude hen* ('not even one thing') makes the following words express 'a cosmogonic speculation in natural philosophy' which is inconsistent with Johannine thought.

When John is introduced as a witness in verse 6, it is curiously suggested that an indirect allusion to the evangelist's testimony may be intended as well as the direct statement of the Baptist's testimony. Exod. 34:6 is rightly seen as the background to the 'grace and truth' of verses 14 and 17. In verse 18 *monogenes theos*

is read and properly construed: the only-begotten is the one who manifested the Father, and the only-begotten is himself God, the one who has his being in the Father's bosom.

The date at which the lectures were given is reflected in the reference to a possible Mandaean background here and there – not that Barth paid serious attention to such a background. But it is no disparagement of the work to say that, at this time of day, it will be valued more for the light that it throws on the history of Barth's thought than for light on the meaning of the Fourth Gospel.

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BUT I SAY TO YOU . . .

The Sermon on the Mount

D. A. Carson

Baker Book House/Paternoster Press, 1978, 157pp., £4.40 paperback; ISBN 0 8010 2480 3.

Professor Carson says in his exposition of Matthew 5-7: 'The more years I put into the study of Scripture, the more I find myself under its authority and judged by it, rather than the authority over it with competence to judge it.' (p. 149). His exposition is consistently evangelical in that sense, and it takes very seriously the huge problems of interpretation which are raised by the Sermon on the Mount. Professor Carson believes that the Sermon on the Mount is not a collection of different sayings of Jesus (or even of the early church) somewhat haphazardly arranged, but a condensed report of a sermon actually given by Jesus on a hillside in Galilee. He gives a most clear and illuminating account of the logical structure and progression of thought within the Sermon. He sees its aim to be not only to drive men and women to a sober recognition of their sin, but also to portray the pattern of conduct of disciples living under kingdom authority.

Two appendices discuss the critical problems and possibilities of theological interpretation which must be faced by any expositor of