KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Volume IV Number 2 Winter 1981

incorporating The Kingsman

KING'S
THEOLOGICAL
REVIEW

Volume IV Number 2

Winter 1981

WHAT THERE IS TO READ
III THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY SCENE

J.L. Houlden

The purpose of this article is to offer a survey of New Testament commentaries in English currently available, that is, in print now or until recently, together with some reflections on their existence and use. The field is limited in this way, partly because the aim is to interest those who do not necessarily have access to large theological libraries, with their accumulation of past literature, and partly because the number of works to be considered would otherwise become unwieldy. *Religion and Theology 6: a select book guide*, published by the SCM Press in 1981, lists eleven series of NT commentaries (not all of them by any means complete) as at present easily obtainable. For the most part, I shall concentrate on weightier rather than lighter works. Though small commentaries have their virtues, and economy (whether in schools or elsewhere) may compel their use, they generally fail to satisfy when consulted for any specific purpose, and I take the readers of this *Review* to be interested in something a little more ambitious than scraps of historical or literary information.

The bookshops report a marked decline over the last few years in the sale of biblical commentaries. If this were not accompanied by some comparative rise in the sale of other kinds of writing on the Bible, it might be covered by the blanket explanation of all such phenomena, recession. But it seems that the proportion of the market taken by commentaries has declined, and this provokes thought. It is not as if recent years have seen a reduction in the number of those who might be expected to need such works. Students continue to come forward in substantial quantity to read theology or religious studies; there is a persisting demand for teachers of religious education; the churches continue to tap new sectors of their membership for ordination, and part-time courses provide for the training of a constant flow of candidates, alongside the traditional residential theological colleges. At the same time, there is ample evidence of interest in extra-mural courses in the subject, and in many parts of the country the churches have been developing lay education with a new professionalism. Even at a time of stringency in the universities, the setting up of new courses is not wholly unknown.

Unless, depressingly, it is a question of sheer cost, the explanation of the tendency to shy off commentaries may be a shift of emphasis in the syllabus of a number of courses. The traditional concentraion on the set book, to be covered from beginning to end, tends to give way to a more selective use of the text, perhaps on thematic lines, a change of policy which discourages personal investment in expensive commentaries. Often, there is a more marked movement away from the close study of the text, at least of a kind which sends the student to a substantial commentary. At a time when the field of NT studies has become dauntingly wide and diverse, courses have become restricted in scope or reduced to surveys. Even thirty years ago, students could be at any rate exhorted to read a commentary on most of the NT during an undergraduate or ordination course. Now both the width of NT studies themselves and the increased claims of other theological subjects mean that such exhortation lacks even a minimal realism.

The Theory of the Commentary

But there may be other and more interesting reasons for the movement away from the commentary (if that is what is happening), at a time, it is worth observing, when 'biblical religion' retains its hold on a considerable section of the Christian public. Before turning to the commentaries themselves, it is worth standing back from this age-long genre of scholarly writing and enquiring what its purpose now is. It has after all had a good run for its money. It can claim to be the oldest continuous element in the range of Christian literature, going back to Origen certainly and, arguably, the Epistle of Barnabas in the early years of the second century. Of course the continuity masks enormous diversity of method and assumption. Sometimes there has been sharp contention about the right way to approach the task (as in relation to the validity of allegorical interpretation) but for the most part the development of the commentary has been gradual rather than disjointed, with slowly evolving changes of direction. And—though the present signs of the interested public's 'going off' commentaries may be straws in the wind—there has been little radical questioning of the commentary itself. Through extraordinary changes of approach to the Bible, the commentary has made its serene way. Publishers and editors have mounted series after series, each attempting the task from some marginally new standpoint or seeking to identify and attract a fresh section of the public. The time may be ripe for an assessment of the whole enterprise.

It is on the face of it remarkable that it has survived so robustly the massive changes of attitude to the Bible which have come about in the past two centuries, both critically and theologically. Either aspect alone might have been expected to deal grievous blows. It is not obvious that the writing of a commentary on the text is a suitable way of putting forward the fruits of the many different kinds of critical work which constitute modern biblical scholarship. It is hard to unify them in a presentable way in relation to a text followed loyally, one section after another. Notably in the Synoptic Gospels, and perhaps Galatians, the tangle of issues is so complex that it is virtually impossible to encompass them satisfactorily in the discussion of passages seriatim. It may be said that this need not matter much: other kinds of study can be read in addition. The difficulty is that to do what can be done in commentary form may be to be forced to mislead. It may be felt that those commentaries which attempt to be comprehensive are unreadable, and those which do not are objectionable for neglecting important areas of enquiry.

Theologically, the lack of serious questioning is perhaps less surprising; for both conservative and critical Protestants have (with some Anglo-Saxon exceptions) stood firm on the authoritative role of Scripture, while Roman Catholic scholars have developed a new and lively enthusiasm for the doctrine. Still, there has been enough discussion of the principles of biblical interpretation, as well as questions of authority, to make it strange that we have not seen a franker theological challenge to the commentary. For, theologically, its assumption has always been that somehow, line by line, sentence by sentence, as sheer words, Scripture remains significant, and is not merely a collection of texts of long ago. True, many modern commentators have written as if it were just that: in the interests of the pure pursuit of the critical method, they have refrained in effect from theological interpretation. But, apart from those whose horizons have been confined by impending examinations, most of their readers (and royalty-payers) have approached them with some sort of theological interest and expectation, however unformed.

In that sense, there is a sickness, even an unconscious confidence-trick, at the heart of the world of the commentary, regarded as an undertaking involving scholar, student, and worshipper. That world (and here it is simply one face of the religious and theological world generally) has not done much about the possibility that the role of the Bible within the Christian religion might be thought of otherwise than the commentary has traditionally assumed, and expressed otherwise than the format of the commentary easily makes possible.

Clearly, those concerned with the texts

purely historically, as manifestations of early Christianity, or even (again historically) for their formative influence throughout Christian history, have no necessary theological duty. But modern believers, who must encounter the texts in worship and debate as well as in the study, may benefit from conceptions of the biblical writings which the commentary is ill-fitted to foster. Bluntly, it may be that he who would now feed on the Bible theologically or religiously needs to be diverted from merely tracing the detail of the text, with the often implicit sense that it was written to provide him throughout with plainly serviceable truth, and should seek rather to grasp as a whole the religious and theological 'picture' of the evangelist or epistle-writer, according to the writer's own circumstances and intentions. He will do this in the hope of its stimulating his own theological striving rather than enforcing his every thought. True, he may then return to the detail of the text, but, in the order of his reading, the monograph or analytical discussion rather than the commentary may be the better starting-point. His need is for more discursive writing, which will point out the salient features of the text, show light and shade, and capture the writer's thought. One has only to turn from almost any commentary on Mark to, for example, R.P. Martin's *Mark, Evangelist and Theologian* (1972) or H.C. Kee's *Community of the New Age* (1977) to grasp the point. The latter, with their analytic and imaginative approach, are, whatever their demerits, incomparably more effective in promoting a theological appreciation of the Gospel, in its own historical right, while making full use of historical-critical method.

On such a view, the commentary may be justly dethroned from that position which, on an older concept of biblical authority and of the nature of the biblical text (both more literal and more literary), it has so long occupied. Its role will become more ancillary than primary, at all levels of the use of the Bible, where theological interest is chiefly involved.

What is more, the regrettable and largely harmful tension between critical and theological or religious interest, as it presently exists, might then be lessened. As matters stand, those in the latter position often feel unhelped by the historical and critical information so generously provided by modern scholarship. They are left wondering what to do next. But if that information can be brought into a form which gives a picture of the ancient writer's mind and world, seen as a coherent theological and religious whole, they may be stimulated to creative theological thought, appropriate to their own time and place. It is improbable that dogged study, line by line, even section by section, will produce that kind of stimulation, and the commentary is generally unsuited to be its literary instrument. This is not to deny that, especially in the case of texts where the historical aspect is less prominent, the cumulative effect of a penetrating commentary can sometimes be exactly what is required; and Ernst Haenchen's work on Acts (1971) shows that some masterpieces can achieve it, even where a mass of technical information is involved. Of course, neither approach does more than provide the starting-point for present use and interpretation—the hard work of hermeneutics remains—but it is important to find the most satisfactory basis for that work.

It is worth noting at this point that we may be on the edge of new developments in the theory and art of the commentary. One in particular will threaten to send the historical-critical approach packing. I think that there has not yet appeared a full-scale commentary on a whole NT text written from a structuralist standpoint, but it cannot be long delayed. It will see the meaning of the text by way of its logical patterns and verbal and syntactic rhythms; and it will deliberately eschew all historical material which seeks understanding by means of empathy with the original writer and his readers. The appeal of such a method is predominantly aesthetic. Its austere elegance purifies the mind, and 'meaning' is found at a level of refined abstraction—but it is not easy to rest content that it should stay there alone.

Theologically more significant would be commentary along lines laid down in the hermeneutical work of Paul Ricoeur (see, for example, his *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 1981). This would alter radically the focus in

which critical study is seen. He discounts the claims of historical method as 'romanticist' and illusory, in so far as it reckons to yield an entry into the writer's mind and life. Instead, there is to be direct encounter with the revelatory text, which, once written, he sees as freed from its original historical context and intention. It constitutes its own witness to 'the Word'. There is a sense in which this marks a return to pre-critical ways of coming to a text—a text rather than, as so often now, in effect the people behind it. It is an approach which abandons the uncommitted neutrality of the historian and reintroduces faith into the process of apprehending the text. In this, he is the heir of Barth and Bultmann in their exegetical work. The Christian interpreter is foolish to come to the NT as if with one hand tied behind his back.

Only time will tell whether innocence can be recovered and whether the historically minded commentators will be content with a new role or even to disappear altogether. So far, the signs are that they must be accepted and somehow worked with, however hard and uncertain a task they give to the theological user of the text.

The Use of Commentaries

To be more practical what do people expect from commentaries on the NT? Are their hopes realistic? What may a commentary reasonably be expected to provide, and what should a commentary writer set out to achieve? It seems likely that people often approach commentaries with misplaced or inordinate hopes. The very production of one new series after another, often differing little from each other in essential approach and content, indicates as much.

Three classes of people read commentaries: those working towards examinations, whether as teachers or students; those preparing for sermons and study groups; and interested people simply hoping to grow in knowledge and faith. School use, church use, home use. As far as students are concerned (and they now provide the bulk of the market—without them commentaries would not be published), there is a kind of unnoticed conspiracy of which they are the beneficiaries or victims. Though it represents only one of a number of options, some of them increasingly preferred, the doctrine is still widely held that the study of the NT ought to proceed by way of the detailed, linear investigation of texts, and its examination ought to be largely by way of comment on set passages. So mastery of a commentary becomes the route to—and often the hardly distinguished substitute for—mastery of a text. Mastery, of course, of one kind: akin to the mastery of a piece of terrain achieved by the walker who observes the path as he goes, step by step. It is one way, but not necessarily the most effective or important way, of coming to comprehend and appreciate the territory. It trains certain desirable intellectual qualities, but it leaves others undeveloped and even suppressed. Syllabus-makers, examiners, and commentary writers (hats often coinciding upon a single head) unite in perpetuating the doctrine—and the sales of the books on which its practical application depends.

As far as the question of mastery of the text goes, the truth may be that everything depends on the commentary used: on whether its author has the mind to use the detail in a way that is self-transcending, that is, so as to reflect the flow of the writer's thought in the work as a whole. The conventions of commentary-writing do not always lend themselves easily to the achievement of that purpose.

Preachers have a harder task than students, in principle if not in practice (few congregations now being as exacting as boards of examiners, where use of the Bible is concerned). For them, commentary lore is a potential snare. They may be tempted to find virtue in the mere conveying of information about the Bible, as if that could be more than a starting-point or resource for preaching, or perhaps its embellishment . With a few striking exceptions, commentaries offer mainly raw material, which may contribute to the church use of the Bible, but leaves much work still to be done. They pose the question, which has already been raised from another side: how may this material become, along with other ingredients, nourishing food for the faithful or the enquiring? The good commentary has made possible a moving and fascinating excursion into the early Christian world. But where is the motive power for the

return journey, or what may the voyager expect to gain beyond wistful memories?

At this crucial point, the preacher (or, more generally, the 'church user' of the Bible) is almost unsupported by the scholarly world, and can scarcely be blamed for losing heart, especially as no other world does much to help him either. No wonder he so often ceases to pay much attention to those who write on the Bible, whether in commentaries or elsewhere. The journeys they facilitate seem important, but how is that importance to be realised and translated into usable currency?

The matter may be stated thus. The preacher faces the task of preparing his message. In that task, he may see Scripture either as a resource to be drawn upon for subjects otherwise determined or as placed before him for comment and exposition. Whether out of tradition or impelled by modern lectionaries, most of them compiled to provide thematically arranged readings, he is more likely to adopt the second approach. Naturally, he will turn to commentaries for help: it is the obvious course. Occasionally, they will stimulate him, but often they will leave him baffled. The obvious source of help has failed to take him more than a few inches of his way, and, wanting to be faithful to Scripture, he is unsure what following steps are legitimate: canons of procedure are lacking, and the raw material seems raw indeed. So from this side too the question may be raised, whether, from the point of view of the preacher's task, which is one kind of theological use of the Bible, the commentary is the best tool. Other kinds of writing on the Bible, both its text and its use, may be more suited to his purpose.

And the domestic user, at his own gentler level, suffers similar perplexities. He may be fascinated to follow the argument of Paul through Romans. He may find it illuminating to have difficulties cleared up, exciting to be immersed in the construction and sense of the Gospel of John. But the more efficient and acute the commentary, the more it may make him aware of the distance between the world of the text and his own world, and of the curious combination of directness and complexity which relates him as reader to the writer of the text on which he works. And if his purpose in approaching the text in the first place was hope for its usefulness, then he may find the whole business much more indirect than he imagined. For him too, the commentary may not be the best tool to bring to the biblical writings. It starts him off, perhaps, but stops short at a problematic point, leaving few signs to guide the rest of the journey.

It takes an unusually good commentator to transcend the section by section approach to which his task for the most part commits him. He is almost bound to give the impression that a text may be 'understood' by discovering the lexical meaning of its words and the bearing of its historical references. His form impels him towards gross hermeneutical oversimplification. A text is more than the sum of its details, its thoughts more than the individual steps in its argument. It is false optimism to expect a commentary to reveal all that a text has to give. Even with the matter included by convention in introductions (concerning authorship, date, literary integrity, etc.), a commentary too often fails to convey much sense of the thrust of a writing as a whole or to give the reader a coherent picture of the mind disclosed by it.

There is then a case to be made against the commentary. Partly, too much has been expected of it; partly, the conventions which necessarily govern its production are too narrow. The case has a theological aspect, related to the place of the Bible in Christian theology; an academic aspect, concerned with both the many-sided question of the proper elucidation of texts and the best way of presenting scholarly work on them; and a practical aspect, concerned with the needs of those who wish to read the texts. Dissatisfaction is more often felt (as boredom, bafflement, or disappointment) than expressed.

There is also a case to be made on the other side. The commentary remains a useful way of assembling and presenting a mass of sheer information about a text. To follow a commentary from cover to cover remains an unrivalled discipline, enabling the reader to immerse himself in the argument of a text, usually without undue distraction from the commentator himself. There is a sense in which the good commentator lets the writer speak for himself. The commentary minimises the obtrusion of

the scholar and maximises the presence of the biblical writer. The commentator is the servant of the text in a way and to a degree that, for example, the writer of a monograph is not.

This has a special value at our present stage of biblical scholarship, especially in relation to the Gospels and Acts. Redaction-criticism and the general interest in the evangelists as theological writers of considerable subtlety and distinctiveness have led to the production of numerous works attempting to identify their theological ideas. Some of them are open to the criticism of concentrating too much on certain features of a Gospel, in order to achieve a coherent picture, to the neglect of other features which may be hard to reconcile with what is presented as the dominant conception. Admirable and creative though this approach to the Gospels is, it suffers from this defect—and there is no form of writing so calculated to remedy it as the commentary, forcing attention on the text, item by item, giving to each part its own weight. The commentary allows no escape into generalities or analyses which gloss over difficulties and inconveniences. It is, I think, a fact that there has not yet appeared a commentary on any of the Synoptic Gospels which has fully digested the considerable amount of redaction-critical and theologico-critical work already achieved. That work has been mainly done in the form of monographs on particular passages or more or less impressionistic analyses of the text as a whole, often singling out one theme or group of themes as the key to its message. It may be simply that the commentary is inimical to the presentation of this kind of work—it would blunt its effect and load it with needless impedimenta. But there may also be a suspicion of evasion of difficulty which is not wholly without basis, and it is an evasion which the commentary rejects.

The Series

It is time to turn to the commentaries themselves. For reasons of publishing convenience, they mostly appear in series. (When they escape into independence, as did C.K. Barrett's large and popular work on the Gospel of John, there is usually a tale of publishing negotiation to be told—in that case, the work was too long for the series for which it was intended.) Uniformity of appearance tends to arouse expectation of uniform treatment, even of uniform merit. The expectation is usually unjustified. The consumer should view the existence of a series not as an invitation to open-armed and comprehensive welcome but as a signal for caution. Few series are ever completed. They are produced, often through the dilatoriness or death of authors, over a long period, during which fashions of scholarship change and its achievements increase. Unless it is the work of one man (as in the relatively light though highly valued writings of William Barclay), a series usually represents several levels of competence, several stages of scholarship, perhaps several approaches to the task. A general editor may attempt to impose a single concept of what a commentary in his series involves, but he will not always succeed, and in the recruitment of contributors he is at the mercy of scholars' availability and his own fallible judgement. (I was once recruited, spy-like, in a chance encounter in an Oxford street, and did not dare to ask the editor whether he had left home determined to ask the first remotely plausible person he came across.)

While some, perhaps the occasional affluent student or ordinand keen to equip himself for a lifetime's ministry, set out to acquire a complete series, sales indicate that the public is more discriminating. Some series hardly sell at all, often because they are too ambitious for most readers' purposes, and in practice the Pelican commentaries, now mostly published in addition by the SCM Press or, in two cases (the Revelation of John and the Captivity Epistles), solely under the dual imprint, dominate the scene as far as the Gospels are concerned, while the volumes published by A. & C. Black hold the field for the rest of the NT. For the moment less complete, the New Century Bible makes a more and more significant third among the weightier series. None of the three expects knowledge of Greek, all aid the reader into some use of it.

Both the Pelican and the Black series illustrate the point about diversity. In the former, the commentary on the Gospel of Mark by D.E. Nineham (1963), the general editor, set the tone. Its two companions, on Matthew and

Luke (J.C. Fenton and G.B. Caird), appeared at the same time, but are briefer in proportion to the length of the texts concerned. They have something of a supplementary character, an approach by no means indefensible in the light of the orthodoxy on the Synoptic Problem and the concentration on a broadly form-critical approach current at the time of writing. It is a great pity that these justly popular commentaries were written just before the work of the redaction-critics came upon the English scene. (The work of Bornkamm, Barth and Held on *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* was published in translation in the same year, 1963, and Conzelmann's *Theology of Luke* in 1960.) For this reason, all three are dated in the range of considerations they bring to bear on the texts, but this is more serious in the cases of Matthew and Luke because of the comparative lightness of treatment. Nineham's Mark retains strengths enough.

As far as the other Pelican commentaries so far published are concerned, those on the Captivity and Pastoral Epistles (J.L. Houlden, 1970 and 1976) and that on the Revelation of John (John Sweet, 1979) come closest to the model set by the Marcan original, John Ruef's work on I Corinthians (1971) being much slighter. John Marsh on the Fourth Gospel (1968) is a good deal lengthier than his predecessors, and again had the misfortune to coincide with or just precede an outpouring of fascinating new work on John and indeed an abundance of major commentaries, both new and old (the translation of Bultmann, whose work started its German life in 1941, came out in 1971).

In the Black series, the volumes on the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, which made their appearance twenty and more years ago, have somewhat slipped into the background (they do not appear in *Religion and Theology 6*). They are victims of the remarkable developments in Gospel scholarship in recent decades. The commentaries on the rest of the NT (and now the set is almost complete) hold their own well and they appear to meet the needs of most students—the pipers who chiefly call the tune as far as the economics of the matter go. They have achieved considerable uniformity of scale and approach. Most remain up to date—alas, a wasting asset. The flagship is undoubtedly the triple contribution of C.K. Barrett (Romans, I and II Corinthians, 1957, 1968, 1973), with Sophie Laws on James (1980) making the most recent addition to the fleet, and F.W. Beare on Philippians (1959) as the oldest member still afloat.

The two series represent different ways of treating the text: the Black authors run alongside the text in an undifferentiated flow of comment and argument. Their temptation is to indulge in unreadable parenthetical asides, in order to fit in pieces of information not readily incorporated into the main discussion. But at least the reader is able to follow the text without undue distraction and complication. A modified form of the same method is adopted by the New Century Bible, and it has much to commend it.

The Pelican commentaries take a two-tier approach. general comment on the passage, followed by detailed notes. Undoubtedly, this gives the commentator greater scope and makes for tidy presentation. But readers may find it tiresome to approach each passage twice over at two different levels. The Hermeneia series works with three different types of comment, representing different degrees of detail. Value for money is increased, ease of use diminished, especially if one is primarily interested in reading the text rather than looking up particular points.

The New Century Bible and the Hermeneia series are more recent than Black and Pelican, and are gradually being extended. The editors of Hermeneia have shown commendable flexibility in bringing together original contributions in English and translations of established German commentaries, such as Conzelmann on I Corinthians and Bultmann on the Johannine Epistles (in English, 1975 and 1973). In the former category, the new work of H.D. Betz on Galatians is particularly welcome. It fills a yawning gap. (He is the only commentator I have noticed to question the value of commentary-making, but he announces his full conversion.)

The New Century Bible has already made a number of useful contributions and is rapidly moving to completion. Among them, Hugh

Anderson on Mark (1976) invites comparison with Nineham, published thirteen years earlier. He takes note of much of the redaction-critical and theological work done on Mark in the interval. The fact that, in the body of the commentary, it makes less difference to the treatment than might be expected, while no doubt deliberate, may also illustrate what was said above, both about the difficulty of using the commentary form for conveying the results of such work and about its value as putting a brake on one-sided and speculative attempts to capture the thought of an evangelist. This series can be relied on for uniformity of scale and weight, with the exception of W. Neil on Acts (1973), which covers the twenty-eight chapters in under two hundred pages of comment.

The Commentaries

From the series to the available commentaries on the books of the NT. Partly for reasons which have already been noticed and partly because of the sheer volume of scholarly work published on the Gospels in recent years, representing an increasingly wide range of techniques and approaches, commentaries on the Gospels (especially the first three) are less satisfactory than those on other NT writings. And the more the reader expects a commentary to be a comprehensive guide, the less he is likely to be gratified. Still, some attempts are more valiant and effective than others.

H.B. Green's work on Matthew in the New Clarendon Bible (1975), relatively brief though it had perforce to be, manages to gather the fruits of some of the more important recent work on the Gospel and points the reader in promising directions. In these respects, it stands alone. But consideration of Matthew gives the opportunity to make the point that sometimes works which do not purport to be commentaries may in fact serve the purpose. M.D. Goulder's *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* contains a detailed treatment of the whole text, section by section, admittedly in the interests of a highly distinctive and controverted standpoint.

E. Schweizer's *The Good News According to Matthew* (1976) explicitly distinguishes itself from 'scholarly commentaries'. It dispenses with what some may describe as the clutter that fills so many commentaries, and is distinctly expository in purpose, but it keeps recent studies only just out of sight. It is for the preacher rather than the examination candidate, like the companion volume on Mark (1971).

The second Gospel has already received its share of attention, but it is worth noting that, for the study of the Greek text, C.E.B. Cranfield's work of 1963 in the Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (in which it is partnered only by C.F.D. Moule on Colossians and Philemon, 1957) is full of useful material. It was written in the fifties (amended edition 1963) and so antedates the major developments in Marcan studies of the last twenty years. By present standards, its emphasis is linguistic rather than theological. The same datedness must be attributed to the other large-scale commentary of the fifties, that of Vincent Taylor (1952), which, classically impressive in appearance, remains available, but can hardly fail to disappoint especially from the point of view of general perspective. After thirty short years, such works seem now to lack a whole dimension of historical-theological acuteness.

Commentaries vary in the degree of originality of standpoint to which they aspire. Some frankly take a new or distinctive line, pressing it in the face of all obstacles. Others set out to present the current state of scholarly play. The Pelican commentaries have deliberately adopted this approach with the resounding exception of J.C. O'Neill on Romans (1975), which exhibited the transient brilliance of a fireworks display. And a glance at I.H. Marshall on Luke (opening volume of the New International Greek Testament Commentary, 1978) might give the impression that it too belongs to this second category. Massive, bulky, and technical to a fault, surely it must summarise all that has been thought about Luke. It does not. In the service of a view of Luke which sees him as closely dependent on a number of sources, it bypasses a whole stimulating area of recent work which brings out the strength of Luke's creativity. While there are serviceable shorter works (E.E. Ellis, New Century Bible, 1974, a revision of an older work, and G.H.P. Thompson, New Clarendon Bible, 1972), Luke

still awaits a satisfactory commentary which takes account of the great strides made in recent years. If, that is, the task is now worth attempting. As suggested earlier, Haenchen on Acts gives hope that it can still be done. His work stands unrivalled, though the sobriety of F.F. Bruce on the Greek text (Tyndale Commentaries, second edition 1952) makes him a desirable companion.

The Gospel of John has been attracting commentators on the grand scale: R.E. Brown (Anchor Bible, two volumes, 1966) is comprehensive without being in the least unreadable. R. Schnackenburg (1965) takes two large volumes to reach chapter twelve. On a more practical scale for everyday use, B. Lindars (New Century Bible, 1972) is not only attractive in its own right but gives more of an impression of the many interesting lines of Johannine study at present being pursued than, for example, J.N. Sanders and B.A. Mastin (1968), which nevertheless has the advantages of the mode of presentation of the Black series.

While the Pauline corpus is admirably served by the Black series (especially by C.K. Barrett on the Roman and Corinthian letters and Ernest Best on I and II Thessalonians, 1972), there are other luminaries. C.E.B. Cranfield's two volumes on Romans, heralding a new run for the detailed International Critical Commentary (1975 and 1979), provide an exhaustive treatment of the Greek text. More theological, but not uniformly digestible, because of its presentation in summary form of a vast range of research, is Käsemann on Romans (1973, translation 1980). It is relentlessly penetrating and rewards persistence. Works on other Pauline writings have been referred to in other contexts. A medium weight book on Galatians is still wanted, and its absence tends to keep a central NT writing out of the syllabus and the programme of the serious study group.

Gaps remain in the commentary repertory, despite the apparent abundance of works available. Apart from H. Montefiore in the Black series (1964), Hebrews is ill served when it comes to full-scale exegetical comment. The Catholic Epistles receive substantial treatment in the Black series at the hands of J.N.D. Kelly (Petrines and Jude, 1969), J.L. Houlden (Johannines, 1973), and Sophie Laws (James, 1980). G.B. Caird (Black, 1966) and J. Sweet (Pelican, 1979) both offer wholly adequate commentaries on the Revelation of John.

Whether the commentator's craft is on the wane and whether it should be are debatable questions. They deserve more discussion than they have received. Teachers and preachers could derive advantage from a more critical attitude to that approach to the Bible which the commentary represents. But no doubt it will survive, continuing to modify itself imperceptibly from one style to another, and fulfilling certain indispensable roles, but not perhaps hogging the centre of the stage quite as much as in the past. In the history of Christian theology, NT commentators, from Origen to Augustine, Luther to Barth, have used their work to make major contributions to the movement of Christian thought. Is the commentary likely to play that part again?

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: THREE INTERRELATED STUDIES

I THEOLOGY OF A BOOK

Peter R. Ackroyd

There are clear advantages in starting this discussion with something that we can recognize precisely and agree on exactly. This is the fact that there is a book of the Old Testament which is described as Isaiah. If, as commonly and as in the general title given to these three studies, this is extended to 'The Book of Isaiah', there is both gain and loss: gain, because it thereby becomes clear that we are referring to the book rather than to the individual named Isaiah; loss,