

Reviews

THIS MAN JESUS. An Essay Toward a New Testament Christology, by Bruce Vawter. *Geoffrey Chapman*, London, 1975. 216 pp. £3

Prospective readers should note the subtitle and not be misled by the publisher's claim that this book 'analyses the Christ portrayed in the gospel stories' and provides 'an examination of the events of Christ's life from birth to the Resurrection.' Vawter has in fact, and quite properly, concentrated on the titles of Jesus, and a selection of those; alongside them he discusses the confessional, hymnic passages ('homologies') Phil. 2:6-11, Col. 1:15-20, 1 Tim. 3:16, Heb. 1:3, and also, though he does not consider it strictly a 'homology', Jn. 1:1-18. These materials are preceded by a first chapter on the resurrection traditions, focused round 1 Cor. 15:3-8, and followed by a final chapter on the virgin birth.

The book is intended as a work of popularisation, since Vawter presumes that his readers will find references to modern work by book and page superfluous, p. 7. It is doubtful, however, that the common reader will find it easy going, and he may even have difficulty at times in making certain of Vawter's final position. Take, for example, his discussion of the phrase 'on the third day' in the tradition of the death and resurrection of Jesus in 1 Cor. 15. He rejects the idea that it comes from the actual events, the finding of the tomb empty and the appearances of the risen Lord, even though, confusingly, the appearances 'might well have begun on a third day following the crucifixion', p. 39. Next he rejects the notion that Sunday is the Lord's day because he rose on that day; on the contrary, the first Christians continued to keep the Jewish Sabbath with a eucharistic night vigil appended, running through to the early morning of 'the first day of the week'. Vawter then remarks that only in the second century, 'it seems', was Easter fixed on a Sunday. But how this point about the annual celebration is related to the weekly celebration is nowhere brought out. In fact he believes that Jesus himself had spoken of his vindication shortly after death, following OT usage in which 'the third day' is

frequently used of speedy deliverance. The source of the third day in the resurrection traditions goes back, therefore, to the sayings of Jesus. This reconstruction of Vawter's still leaves us with a puzzle about why the resurrection tradition literalised the 'third day' sayings. Might it not have done so because of those events that Vawter half-heartedly ('might well') places on the Sunday: the first appearances of the risen Lord?

His discussion of the titles 'Son of Man' and 'Son of God' is also likely to cause difficulty. For 'Son of Man' Vawter first sets out, and the unwary reader might well suppose with approval, what he (wrongly) calls the averaged view of the majority of scholars: only the future, apocalyptic Son of Man sayings are authentic, and they speak of him as of One other than Jesus. Difficulties are raised against this view, and then Vawter's own opinion begins to emerge in mid-paragraph through a (faulty) report of E. Schweizer's view: one should begin from the present Son of Man sayings, which depict one in the service of man and rejected by men. (Schweizer thinks that 'Son of Man' is a periphrasis for 'I' in some contexts, and on this his position depends, but Vawter rejects this possibility! p. 106, p. 117). To these present sayings may properly be added those concerning the future exaltation of the Son of Man, though it was only later tradition that identified Jesus with the Judge who comes on the clouds. Schweizer is said to leave open the option that Jesus made a title of self-identification out of the Ezechelian 'son of man' address, but Vawter concludes 'we cannot foreclose the possibility of all these ideas in the mind of Jesus as easily as they were later coalesced in the mind of the Church', p. 119. I believe that some possibilities must be foreclosed here; what is worse is that I can see no way of finding out just which ideas Vawter has in mind. Just how far back is the phrase 'all these ideas' meant to throw?

Over 'Son of God' also Vawter in-

dulges himself with a hold-all statement: 'we must reckon with the possibility that Jesus himself in his historical lifetime was known—and perhaps knew himself, at least in equivalencies—to be Son of God in all the ways then imaginable', p. 123. Since the discussion has covered both an 'adoptive' meaning and 'an utterly literal affirmation of deity', it is difficult to see how Jesus could have held both these contradictory views about himself, let alone the whole gamut of ways then imaginable of being Son of God.

But if this book is likely to cause serious difficulties for readers, it must nevertheless be said that, with the exception of L. Sabourin's *The Names and Titles of Jesus*, we do not have an up-to-date Catholic NT christology of comparable depth and seriousness available in English. Readers should prepare themselves for a stimulating set of adventures of ideas. Jesus is said to have sharply refused the title of Messiah: when Peter said to him 'You are the Christ' Jesus replied 'Get behind me Satan'. (Mysteriously there is no reference to E. Dinkler, who put forward a

similar view in 1964.) Vawter discusses the death of Jesus under the headings 'The Metaphors of Salvation' and 'The Metaphors of Sacrifice', and the priesthood of Jesus is said to be 'fairly marginal' in the NT, mostly confined to Hebrews and there a matter of typology and midrash (and therefore, I take it, also metaphorical).

Finally, Vawter places special emphasis upon the wisdom tradition as a source for NT christology. He argues that the redaction of wisdom materials implied a basic approval of them; hence we can go back behind the redactor of Coloss. 1:15-20 and acknowledge Christ as the head of the body, *the universe*. This will enable us to account more realistically for the historical, geographical and religious parochialism of Christianity while reaffirming faith in Christ as cosmic Lord. Despite the methodological weakness about the argument from redaction, this suggestion that Christ should be seen as the hidden and trans-historic Lord of Buddhism, Judaism and Islam on the basis of the hymn behind Colossians 1 is well worth meditation.

JEROME SMITH OP

SYMBOLS OF CHURCH AND KINGDOM, by Robert Murray. *Cambridge University Press*, 1975. xv + 394 pp. £8.75.

The subject of this book, *A Study in early Syriac Tradition*, as the subtitle says, may sound abstruse enough, but in fact this is a book for all serious students of Christian antiquity, as well as being likely to interest a more general theological public. Taking as his basic area of investigation the various symbols used of the Church and of the kingdom in 4th Century Syriac writers, especially Ephrem and Aphrahat, the author in fact provides a masterly introduction into a whole world of Christian tradition that had previously been largely inaccessible except to the experts. He begins by giving us a concise account of the literature in question and its background; he then analyses his sources in detail, drawing out parallels with Jewish traditions and other patristic traditions, as well as occasionally referring us back to pre-Christian Mesopotamian sources. He concludes with some more general probings—which he presents tentatively, in view of the current state of investigation—to try to situate the Syriac church vis à vis Judaism, Judaeo-Christianity, and Graeco-Latin patristics.

No student of Christian beginnings can afford to ignore the very tricky area of Judaeo-Christianity, and the essentially Semitic character of the Syriac church makes it an important witness. It is also coming to be recognised that the Syriac tradition may well contain an important clue to the origins of Christian asceticism, as well as supply the background for the Macarian corpus. Fr Murray's book provides an excellent introduction for the beginner in addition to making an important contribution to our understanding in these fields. His scholarship is most impressive, but is presented in a way which does not make impossible demands of the reader; and a very delicate theological sense is also evident throughout.

There has also been a marked increase in recent years in interest in the use of symbols as vehicles of theological expression: particularly, we have been obliged to recognise that Christian theology in its earliest form worked as much with symbols as with logic, appealing to a style of scriptural exegesis current in Judaism, and rich in