

**JESUS** by A.N.Wilson. *Sinclair-Stevenson* London 1992. pp.viii + 269. £15.

A.N.Wilson has written his historical study of Jesus from the standpoint of one who has ceased to be able to worship as a christian, one who believes that if Jesus said the words attributed to him in the gospels, there could be no greater insult to his memory than to recite the creeds (p 255). His reason is that 'I found it impossible that a first-century Galilean holy man had at any time of his life believed himself to be the Second Person of the Trinity' (p. xvi). The reasoning is both tendentious and logically flawed. It is tendentious because the language of the three Persons of the Trinity, or three Persons in one Substance or three *Hypostases* in one *Ousia* is arrived at only after some centuries of development in worship and theology. It is logically flawed because the real question is not what Jesus believed himself to be in his human mind, but rather what God knows him to be. Christian believers hold that the creeds express an infinitely distant, but true, reflection of that divine knowledge, arrived at under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Subjective truth is important, but objective truth is even more important, grounded, as it is, for everyone who believes in God, in God, and authenticated by God.

On the point of subjective truth, Wilson's approach to the gospels is individualistic and inwardly spiritual. Lk. 17:21b (in the RSV—'behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you') is taken by him from the RV ('the kingdom of God is within you') rather than from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, also listed in his bibliography, where a reason is given for the translation chosen. To follow RV is idiosyncratic, to say the least. It is of a piece with In rejecting the third temptation, Jesus rejected the notion not merely of political power but also of the collective response to life. "What is divine in man is elusive and impalpable, and he is easily tempted to embody it in concrete form. Yet those who set out for it alone will reach it together, and those who seek it in company will perish by themselves" (p. 1112, quoting H. Kingsmill *The Poisoned Crown*, 1944). No wonder Form Criticism gets no direct look-in in this book.

That is odd, since Bultmann is quoted, and often misunderstood, quite frequently. Indeed it is evident that Wilson, who tells us that he studied New Testament in Oxford (p. xvii), has done a lot of hard if sometimes quite peculiar work over years in preparing for *Jesus*. His book-list is impressive, and, I suspect, genuine. He acknowledges a special debt to G. Vermes, who read an early draft and made suggestions (p. xvii). Yet Wilson knows only the first two volumes of the revised Schürer. Volume III, 2, 1987, contains the invaluable indices which might have saved Wilson from a number of errors, eg that the Roman soldiers at the cross were legionaries. Consultation of the revised Schürer at I p. 362 would put him right on that point: Pilate's troops belonged to auxiliary Syrian cohorts, there were no legions in Palestine in Jesus' time.

No book written by a person of Wilson's historical and biographical talents who has done the hard work everywhere in evidence could fail to be less than interesting, and after a lifetime of biblical study I found it consistently stimulating, even at its most perverse. For example, the chapter 'His Wondrous Childhood' is based both upon the biblical infancy narratives and upon the apocryphal gospels. That is as if one were to write a study of King John, who died in the Castle at Newark, based both upon official documents and contemporary chroniclers, on the one hand, and on the Robin Hood legends on the other. Wilson must know that is preposterous.

And he not only adopts the dated view that Jesus the Jew did not so much come forward as Lord and Christ in the post-resurrection Jewish-Christian church, of which Peter was first leader and then chief missionary (Cullmann), but instead attributes the Lordship of Jesus, in the meaning the evangelists give to it, to the creative work of Paul. The eucharist is Paul's creation, and is not to be found in the Fourth Gospel (with reference to Bultmann). If Wilson will go back to Bultmann, *New Testament* vol I p. 147–8, he will find that Jn 6.51b–58, while identified as secondary within the Gospel of John, is interpreted in the sense of 1 Cor 10 and 11. If when Wilson wishes to say that 'x' is not found in John he really means, 'not found in Ur-Jn as reconstructed by myself following Bultmann', he might do his readers the courtesy of saying so. A final word about Wilson and the Jesus of history. 'You cannot simply pick up a copy of the Gospels and read them as if they were history. Nor is it possible to read them as if they were imperfect history—as if, let us say, we chose to believe that Jesus really did teach his disciples the Lord's Prayer, but did not really perform miracles. As I have stated in my first proviso, I do in fact commit this 'error' myself at various important junctures of my book. I do it deliberately for the sake of providing the book with a narrative frame in its second half. From this illusion, I believe that it is just possible to reconstruct, I hope plausibly, some picture of the historical Jesus' (pp xiii–xiv) So we are warned, Wilson does and does not believe in what he is doing. I suspect this can partially be explained by Wilson's over-dependence on Vermes. Whatever their bibliographies, Vermes and Wilson proceed as if the new quest for the historical Jesus has never happened. Neither of them seems to know Bultmann's own article on that, late in life, where he affirmed basic things about the Jesus of history going far beyond the 'that'. We all have to read Bultmann and Vermes, but scholarship has, in significant respects, moved beyond them.

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