

ing some privileged access to underlying structures, but simply in his conceptual power). Professor Lampe has little sympathy with metaphysics: a reference to the 'dry abstractions of Augustinian orthodoxy' (p. 227) is typically dismissive. Our mutual colleague, Professor Christopher Stead, has recently shown, in his *Divine Substance* (Oxford, 1977), the delicacy and discrimination that are necessary if the work of men influenced by the logical and metaphysical heritage of Plato and Aristotle is to be appropriately assessed. The disturbing imprecision with which, in *God as Spirit*, terms such as 'being' and 'entity' are handled (cf. e.g. pp. 81, 118, 226-227) suggests that Geoffrey Lampe does not regard such discrimination as either necessary or profitable. It is thus hardly surprising that much patristic trinitarian reflection taken, as it were, simply at imaginative face-value, is easily made to seem merely bizarre. (On a related point: Aquinas' doctrine of subsistent relations, a *tour de force* of logical sophistication, may be unconvincing or even incoherent, but, in order to show that it is either, one must first understand it, and this Lampe seems to me to have signally failed to do: cf. pp. 136, 226).

Shortly after reading *God as Spirit* I read Stead's *Divine Substance*, to which I

have already referred. The effect of reading two such divergent yet complementary works was powerfully to reinforce a growing suspicion that constructive theology is no longer the name of a task that can be adequately undertaken by individual theologians. A work such as *God as Spirit* may do much to meet the exigencies of the religious imagination, but it does little to meet the no less compelling demands of formal, theoretical enquiry. And even a work that met these two exigences would still have to meet the demand, which developments in European thought from Kant to Marx have rendered inescapable, that we attempt critically to ground our forms of speech and behaviour. Yet it seems to me clear that no individual theologian can any longer hope to possess the temperamental, scholarly and conceptual resources that are necessary if this triple exigence is to be met. I do not know what follows from this, but I suspect that, if Christian speech is to survive as something more than the decorative rhetoric of a socially irrelevant cognitive minority, it will be obliged to discover patterns of practical and theoretical collaboration beyond our present conceiving.

NICHOLAS LASH

THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke, by Raymond E. Brown, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1977 £49.50.

If the resurrection narratives, their historicity and their theological meaning, can cause widely divergent opinion among intelligent believers (as recent numbers of *New Blackfriars* have shown), the same holds true for the infancy narratives. They share much in common with the resurrection stories: a dense literary and theological construction; a centrality in Christian belief and imagination; and troubling questions about history, fact and meaning. But with the infancy narratives there seems to have been an even greater reluctance to explore them with the tools of critical exegesis. And for Roman Catholics, dark intimations from Rome have contributed to that hesitation. As a result, there has been no major commentary in English on these complex areas of the Matthean and Lucan gospels.

Raymond Brown has now provided us

with a careful, clear and comprehensive account of these narratives. He is well aware of the problems surrounding the writing of such a commentary, but wishes to continue his task of making critical exegesis more available to a wider audience while respecting the canons of the scholarly community.

Brown does not shun the problem of historicity; but he does note that the trend in exegesis has been away from isolating the historical bits of the Matthean and Lucan narratives within the avowedly theological presentation of the evangelists. Now the concern is more for the evangelists' intent in constructing these narratives and their relationship to the rest of their gospels. Brown is clear in his commitment to redaction criticism. A history of religious approach and a structuralist analysis would also add to our understanding of

these complex narratives, by raising larger questions about borrowings and about the dramatic structure and mythic consciousness. But Brown has chosen wisely to do one thing well, and restricts himself to redaction criticism throughout the book.

The book consists of an extended treatment of each narrative, providing translation, verse-by-verse technical notes, and a commentary on the theological intent and meaning of the pericope. A series of appendices provide discussions on the historicity of a number of areas (Davidic descent, the place of the birth, the census, etc.). A longer theological essay, rather than the brief epilogues at the end of the sections on Matthew and Luke, would have enhanced the value of Brown's work.

Although he highlights all the differences between the two infancy narratives, Brown does see a common understanding of the birth of Jesus in their tendencies "to stress the intrinsic connection of that birth with what has preceded in Israel" and "to develop the christological significance of the birth and thus its incipient continuity with what will follow in the Gospel" (p. 497). The infancy narratives become the link between the Christian

reality and the Jewish heritage in their recapitulation of themes from Jewish history; and their repeated insistence upon God's intervention reaffirms the conviction of God's work in Jesus as the Son of God. The infancy narratives not only recapitulate the past; they prefigure the future as well: the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders in the form of King Herod; the role of Bethlehem and Nazareth as places of prophecy; the roles of Joseph (in Matthew) and Mary (in Luke) as prefigurements of the continuity of the Christian community with the synagogue.

Such a work as Brown's can be of value to those interested in the formation of christology and should be a cause for admiration of the theological subtlety and literary mastery of the evangelists. In view of this, to make a crude notion of history and fact the shibboleth for entering into a study of the infancy narratives and into Christian theology itself would betoken a rather primitive positivistic stance. Brown has done us a service by his respect for the interweaving of theology and history and shows us the maturity of the critical method in this regard.

ROBERT SCHREITER

BIBLICAL STUDIES: The Medieval Irish Contribution, ed. Martin McNamara, *Dominican Publications*, 1976 pp. 164 £2.50

This volume is a collection of four papers read at the General Meeting of the Irish Biblical Association in April 1974, to which is added a translation of a seminal paper by Bernhard Bischoff, who stands behind the studies of the younger scholars that make up the rest of the book. The general editor shows a certain—quite unnecessary—lack of confidence in his contributors. At any rate he tells us they all have Ph.D's, which is, I am afraid rather obvious. J. F. Kelly offers a study of seventh and eighth-century commentaries on Luke. Matthew was the favourite gospel of the early Irish—and not only them—but they were writing about Luke as early as the mid-seventh century. Dr Kelly is able to point to evidence that even at so early a date early Irish exegetes had a very respectable knowledge of patristic, as well as biblical, authors. Even more important they were also capable of original thought about the Gospel text. Dr Peter Doyle

contributes a brief essay on the origins and growth of the Irish Latin Bible. This is a simple essay mainly concerned to convey basic information about the nature and source of texts of the Bible in the early middle ages. He points out that the Vulgate arrived quite early in Ireland and has interesting remarks about the problems of mixed texts. Brian Grogan writes about early Irish eschatological teaching and points to the, at first sight surprising, fact that eschatology dominated early Irish theology. He is much concerned with the problem of purgatory. Frederick MacDonnacha writes about the only surviving Irish *homiliarium*. The texts are late but Dr MacDonnacha suggests they were composed by a member of the community of Armagh in the mid-eleventh century. The four papers add up to a useful contribution to knowledge though some awareness of the wider intellectual context from which most of the works discussed came