

# Reviews

**FROM CHAOS TO COVENANT: USES OF PROPHECY IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH** by Robert P. Carroll, *SCM Press*, London 1981. pp viii + 344 £8.50.

This book is in effect Carroll's working notes for his forthcoming commentary on Jeremiah. It is not, nor was it intended to be, a definitive work, but rather seeks to identify the main issues involved in the interpretation of the book which carries the prophet's name. It does, however, indicate the presuppositions which will underlie Carroll's commentary – namely that the quest for the historical Jeremiah must be abandoned: instead the book is to be understood as the work of a succession of traditionalists. Carroll makes no bones about his standpoint. Indeed his book is written with crusading fervour. He rejects outright the biographical approach of Skinner. For Carroll, Jeremiah is at best a shadowy figure, the author of a poetic tradition 'worked on by many redactional circles, including a major deuteronomistic redaction, and produced over a lengthy period of time' (p 11). The addition of the prose elements 'gives flesh to the bones of the poems'. It is now impossible to construct the life and thought of Jeremiah. So Jer. 36 is interpreted as 'a story created to legitimate the role of the scribe in the creation of the Jeremiah tradition' (p 15). But the book is much more complicated than a combination of poetry edited by the deuteronomists. For Carroll 'too many elements appear to have contributed to the composition of Jeremiah to permit a straightforward account of the development of the tradition. The multiple sources include the original poetic tradition along with developments of it, the deuteronomistic edition produced during the exile, sermons and narratives from different sources (e.g. Egypt, Palestine, possibly Babylon), the salvation oracles developed in the book of consolation,

additions to the tradition (e.g. 17:19-27; 32:36-44; 33), the oracles against the nations (chs. 46-51), and various post-exilic expansions of the tradition (e.g. 23:33-40)' [p 20]. Carroll cannot determine for certain where the tradition was developed though a Palestinian setting would suit his thesis. But the work appears to reflect the fierce political struggle for power in the period of reconstruction of life in Jerusalem. Jeremiah had been vindicated by the fall of the city, which explains why the traditionalists built on his work.

Carroll then analyses the text of Jeremiah including the call narrative; his oracles against the community; the temple sermon; the confessions; his attitude to the king and prophets; the book of consolation and the new covenant; and the final section 37-44. Older ideas are swept away as Carroll again and again indicates the work of the traditionalists who see Jeremiah as *the* true prophet over against the false prophets. For instance Carroll is sceptical about any historicity in the temple sermon incident preferring to attribute the entire sermon to the Deuteronomists who fill in Jeremiah's failure to say anything about the temple, and so justify its destruction. The so-called confessions are understood as 'designed to express the community's response to the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the nation', now 'combined with the motif of the persecuted prophet' (p 111). Their similarity to the Psalms and Job precludes their use for writing a biographical account of the life of Jeremiah. Further, the only innovation in the new covenant passage is the individualization of the divine torah in the people. But from the call narrative on-

wards hope is encouraged for the restoration of Jerusalem. However, it is the old Jerusalem community and their descendants whom the traditionalists condemn in favour of the exiles.

There can be no doubt of the importance of this work, nor of the many insights which Carroll offers. As to the main thesis, it is clear that the book of Jeremiah is a literary creation, though like Jesus the prophet must have made a considerable impact for his oracles to have become the vehicle of the traditionalists. More attention needs to be paid to other exilic and post-exilic theology in contrast to the deuteronomistic, and consideration given as to whether some of this is reflected in the book of Jeremiah. But Carroll has deliberately left many questions unanswered, some of which may be answered in his commentary.

Carroll concludes his work with a sceptical note on the contemporary relevance of the book of Jeremiah. It is true as Carroll earlier points out that prophecy carries no proof of its validity which can only be established by subsequent events.

Its value lies in that it both shows the continual care and concern of God for his people and provides that continuity of faith which subsequently enables the community at large to embrace again that faith. While the book of Jeremiah takes its shape during a particular crisis in the history of a particular people, it encourages those individuals who in any age believe that they are called by God to speak out against contemporary thought and practice to do so regardless of the consequences. The disciple who takes up his cross in obedience to his Lord and suffers for it has no proof that his cause is right, and must be prepared to utter the complaint of Jer. 20: 7ff. or Ps. 22. But in so doing he enters into that continuity of faith described as 'Moses and the prophets'. But without such continuity there would be no tradition for in the end God relies on individuals like Jeremiah to provide that critical expression of faith we call prophecy through which alone his kingdom of equity and justice can be realised.

ANTHONY PHILLIPS

**HALLOWING THE TIME** by Geoffrey Preston O P Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980 pp 163 £4.50.

Preaching, like acting and cookery, is an ephemeral art. Nothing can recapture the exact flavour after the event. The performance is all. Fr Preston must be among the handful of preachers whose sermons bear reading in cold print long after their delivery. This is the second book in two years presenting samples of his word. He has certainly been well served by his editor, who has arranged thirty-five selections in one coherent form, following the march of the liturgy from Advent to Trinity Sunday.

But the main reason for the successful transfer from thin air to compositor's block undoubtedly lies with the author himself. No one was more aware of the problem. In an article in this magazine, (*New Blackfriars*, No 51 (1970) "Wrestling with the Word - I") he said: "To print a sermon is to ask it to live and

breathe in an atmosphere in which it was not evolved" (p 123). No doubt in writing out his sermons and preserving them Preston had more than an inkling of publication one day. But it was the demands of the sermon itself, as Preston saw them, that made the composition so painstaking and resourceful. He knew that every sermon is a "once-for-all event", but he insisted that it had to be prepared with care and industry. The 1970 article describes to what lengths he expected such industry to go. Preston had no wish to turn sermons into ponderous treatises: "people are not concerned to hear of the preacher's intellectual ability, but only to listen to the word of God" (p 125). Preston explained that in the true sermon "the authorities consulted, the Greek and Hebrew background, the Patristic interpretations, the modern commentaries, all fall away and disappear from view".