

BOOK REVIEWS

Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels. By MICHAEL GRANT.
(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977. Pp. 261. Introduction, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$12.50.)

Upon opening the cover of Michael Grant's study of the New Testament, one senses immediately the warm, musty atmosphere of an English university common room and eavesdrops upon one voice in the present debates among English theologians which are heard on these shores occasionally in books like John Robinson's *Honest to God*, or the recent collection of essays entitled, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. That the background of the author is so obvious indicates both the weakness and the strength of this particular work.

Grant describes his aim in the appendix where he comments, "One can write [on Jesus] as a believer, or as an unbeliever, or (as I have attempted to do) as a student of history seeking, as far as one's background and conditions permit, to employ methods that make belief or unbelief irrelevant" (p. 198). "As far as one's background and conditions permit" does not seem to be very far at all, for Grant is consistently unable to shed his own specific cultural milieu.

For example, Grant argues that the overriding and exclusive concern of Jesus was the proclamation of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. In the midst of this conclusion, the aspiring, objective historian betrays his intention to overthrow, with this new view, the nineteenth-century liberal interpretation of Jesus as the meek and mild, compassionate do-gooder. Grant's striking back at his Victorian ancestors reveals how indebted he is to them, and how difficult his attempt at historical objectivity is.

Grant certainly acknowledges this problem, but claims that such objectivity is possible and even achieved in this study. Nevertheless, almost every page testifies to the monumental blocks to culling hard unambiguous fact from the New Testament. The Gospels are the only source of substantial information on the life of Jesus, and the fact is that, at the very least, the gospel writers, whoever they were, had a very different understanding of history than modern historians. To impose modern criteria upon them is, at best, a guessing game which can never be won, given the present sources. That Grant plays the game is the weakness of his study.

Only when the reader puts aside that claim of objectivity does

the strength of Grant's work emerge. Because Grant is a historian by profession, the subtitle, *An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, is technically correct, but it would be more accurate and helpful if the title were, *Jesus: Michael Grant's View of the Gospels*. While his training in history may inform his analysis, Grant is not writing history here; he is asserting in a clear, compelling way his own understanding of Jesus and his own Christian theology.

Even in method, Grant often veers from the common historical norms. His repeated argument that an event in Jesus's life, like the crucifixion, is fact because the early Christians would have found it so hard to accept, or the reverse, that an event like the resurrection, is suspect because the apostles wanted it so badly to be true, is a dubious line of reasoning and certainly not conclusive. The modern imposition of what is desirable or undesirable is unjustified, for what makes us so certain that our value judgments concur with those of the early Christians? Grant is not a historian here; he is a speculative theologian presenting his own judgments.

In the same way, Grant's provocative conclusion to his major theme is not history but theology. He writes at the end of the book concerning charity and compassion. "When Jesus himself laid stress on these qualities, they had been, as we have noted, subordinate to his preaching of the Kingdom of God which would soon, he believed, be completely established on earth. His belief proved untrue: no such Kingdom was established (p. 190)." Perhaps this is true according to Grant's understanding of the Kingdom; however, countless thousands of people over two millennia have disagreed. Grant is engaged in a theological debate with them, and, as such, may be read with enjoyment.

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

JANET EDWARDS

America's First Hospital: The Pennsylvania Hospital, 1751-1841. By WILLIAM H. WILLIAMS. (Wayne, Pennsylvania: Haverford House, 1976. Pp. 186. Acknowledgments, illustrations, charts, tables, appendix, notes, selective bibliography, index. \$12.50.)

From Benjamin Franklin's pioneer account of its beginnings published in 1754, the history of Pennsylvania Hospital has been told and retold. Until now, however, chroniclers of the hospital's past have been uniformly eulogistic and uncritical. In fact, many of the earlier