

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS by Karl Barth,  
Translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns Bart.,  
M.A., 1933. Oxford University Press. London: Humphrey  
Milford. 21/- net.

Sir Edwyn Hoskyns has done the English-speaking theological world an inestimable service by translating into English Karl Barth's famous commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He is to be congratulated on the remarkable skill and insight which he has exhibited in performing his difficult task, and English readers may rest assured that the translation now offered them reproduces with great fidelity the author's meaning.

In his preface to the English translation Barth asks that the book should be read and understood as a whole, at least by prospective critics. This advice should not be ignored. The book will almost certainly be misunderstood by those who do not read to the end. It will be a fortunate thing if there should prove to be many who will not be deterred by its length and difficulty, but, coming to it with unprejudiced minds, will make it their first task to master what the author is really trying to say. A challenge such as this book presents deserves to be taken quite seriously.

Barth claims that "in writing this book, I set out neither to compose a free fantasia upon the theme of religion, nor to evolve a philosophy of it." The commentator is bound by what is before him. ~~His~~ task is to expound loyally his author's meaning. *His* this is so not because the words of Scripture are directly inspired but because they constitute human witness to the unseen reality of God. If it should be argued that we are at liberty to cross-examine the witnesses and, if we see fit, reject their evidence, it is necessary that we should be reminded that the witness has a two-edged character as witness to God and against ourselves, and that the question at issue is not whether God exists but what we must do in view of the abyss between man and God which the witness has revealed. Historical criticism of Scripture there may and should be, but not the kind of criticism which starts by assuming that the phenomenon of Scripture is to be explained on purely naturalistic grounds. Scripture is an utterly human production and altogether questionable ~~and~~ there is a glory which gilds its pages. It reminds men about God and when God wills they do remember. *but*

The theme of the Epistle to the Romans is God's justifying grace in Christ. Barth attempts to show that the Epistle is a unity throughout and that its paradoxes are to be accepted as the inevitable outcome of that fundamental relation between God and man which is the presupposition of all Paul's thinking. What may be called the metaphysical distinction between the Creator

and His creation has a darker character given to it through the fact of human sin, which is essentially the self-assertion of the creature over-against the Creator. The whole concrete, temporal world of human life and thought lies therefore under God's judgment.

The obverse side of judgment, however, is divine forgiveness. Faith is God's miraculous creation in man of the willingness to abandon every claim to human merit and accept forgiveness as the free gift of grace. There is therefore no human knowledge (not even the Barthian theology!) or morality or even piety which can withdraw a ~~man~~ <sup>man</sup> from the shadow of God's judgment. On the other hand there is no virtue in being anti-religious. Neither positive human activity nor its negation is continuous with divine grace. Barth deals the shrewdest of blows to left and right.

To the eye of faith the whole strange and questionable human drama is a tragi-comedy, a tragedy because sin and sorrow <sup>and</sup> inevitable death are intensely real, a comedy because the last word lies with God and that is a word of forgiveness. "Double predestination" which forms such an embarrassing feature in Pauline thought is not to be brushed aside impatiently as alien to modern taste and enlightenment. It is rather to be accepted and interpreted as the gracious act of God who predestines to rejection all sinful human life <sup>and</sup> what area of human life is untainted? - in order that, "our good and ill unreckoned and both forgiven", He may elect all men to eternal life in Jesus Christ. The old man dies that the new man may be born. The phenomena of morality and of religion in all its varieties are, rightly understood, merely parables of the election of the new man in Christ, the subject of faith and recipient of the promises. The phenomena of immorality and irreligion are merely parables of the rejection of the old man, that is of everything human. Life is thus a game, played out upon the brink of death, the abyss which engulfs all the players in their turn. Even Christ, the incarnate Son of God, had to die. The revealed truth of the Resurrection, which is a dogma of faith, assures us that when man dies God recreates. The recreated "I" which in faith the believer accepts as his and which is the subject of faith is recognised as "Christ in me". This is the unic mystica which excludes all that is commonly called mysticism and is the meaning of the substitutionary doctrine of the Atonement. The bond of fellowship between sinful men, of which the visible church is a parable, is to be found not in any sociological conception but in this conception of the indwelling Christ who is the present reality of the new man which we are yet only in promise. We are united by what empirically we are not yet. We are united by our promised membership in the body of Christ. It is this which makes it impossible for us to view the empirical divisions between Christians and Christians and between Christians and the world with an easy conscience. Further, Christian ethics is the ethics of grace and grace like death is a great leveller. What then must we do? Let us cease to mount our little platforms of supposed human superiority and live soberly. And, since by virtue of our faith the love of God is not utterly unknown, let us as a sacrifice of gratitude offer our lives as parables of God's election rather than of His rejection. But do not let us forget that the nine lepers were cleansed as well as the one ~~that~~ returned and <sup>/ who</sup> gave the glory to God.

Of particular interest are Barth's view of the relation between chapter VII. and chapter VIII. of the Epistle - the theologian as well as the critic must have his say here - and his discussion of

the individual's duties towards the constituted authorities.

It was scarcely to be expected that, faced with the great difficulty of the original, the gifted translator should not sometimes nod. There is a slip, for example, at the foot of page 460. Barth means that obedience to the demand which Paul makes is at once (gleichzeitig) frivolous (from the human point of view) and (from the point of view of faith) a parable of Jesus Christ among the sinners. Once or twice the word "unsympathisch" has been misleadingly translated by "unsympathetic". But these are small blemishes which serve merely as a foil to a brilliant performance.

from

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