

Introduction to the New Testament. Vol. 1: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age; Vol. 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity. By Helmut Koester. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 448 pp., \$24.95; 400 pp., \$22.95.

This is a translation and slight revision, by Koester himself, of his German *Einführung*, already extensively reviewed elsewhere. Far from being a standard "introduction" to the NT documents, complete with detailed technical discussion of the date, provenance, literary integrity and structure of each NT book, this pair of volumes aims rather at providing a comprehensive survey of early Christianity in its contemporary setting.

Accordingly the first volume, as the subtitle indicates, provides a sweeping panorama of the Hellenistic age, from just before Alexander the Great until the late second century C.E. It is divided into six sections: (1) historical survey; (2) society and economics; (3) education, language and literature; (4) philosophy and religion; (5) Judaism in the Hellenistic period; (6) the Roman empire as the heir of Hellenism. Yet this brief recital fails to do justice to the wide-ranging discussion. Each subsection contains succinct bibliographies of what Koester holds to be the best treatment of and/or primary sources to the topic or period involved. This background material is not integrated in a detailed way with the second volume, but one leitmotiv that connects the two volumes is Koester's conviction that Judaism of the Greco-Roman period was profoundly Hellenized, thus making Christianity itself, from its inception, an essentially Hellenistic movement. This largely accounts for the relatively slim discussion of distinctively Jewish heritage and literature.

The second volume carries on with (7) the sources for the history of early Christianity; (8) from John the Baptist to the early Church; (9) Paul; (10) Palestine and Syria; (11) Egypt; and (12) Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. It is immediately clear that, after Paul, Koester treats early Christianity geographically. Moreover he does not restrict himself to the twenty-seven canonical books but ranges through the other sixty or so extant documents or fragments of documents from the first 150 years or thereabouts of the Church's life. The resulting panoramic sweep represents Koester's comprehensive vision not so much of NT introduction (despite the title) as of the soil, setting and rise of early Christianity.

In one sense it is far too easy to criticize a book like this, precisely because it covers such a broad spectrum. No one can be a master of material with so wide a sweep, and Koester

should be praised, not criticized, for attempting a massive synthesis. The difficulty in assessing this book is not aided by the fact that Koester has chosen not to use footnotes to document his arguments and conclusions. The brief bibliographies at the beginning of each subsection must suffice. But that is where the first awful suspicions begin: The bibliographies are frequently painfully selective. It is almost beyond comprehension how the relation of the mystery religions to the Hellenistic world and to Christianity can be discussed without so much as mentioning the work of R. E. Brown; how the literary criticism of the Acts can include Cadbury, Bultmann, Haenchen and Schneider but fail even to mention Smith, Ramsay, Bruce, Gasque or Marshall; how discussion of form criticism can touch on none of the essays and books that have raised probing questions about the method (e.g. Güttermanns, Stanton, Ellis); and on and on. In many critical areas this is the least evenhanded treatment I have ever read, and it is not entirely reassuring to be told that the author is here attempting the overarching synthesis and not the detailed technical work, for technical decisions have not only been made (that, after all, is unavoidable) but frequently without indicating to the student the viability of other options or the range of literature on the matters discussed or even the basis on which decisions were made.

Thus one wonders if Koester is a trifle too certain about such things as the historicity of Dionysiac homophagy, the reliability of Josephus, the pre-Christian rise of fully-formed gnosticism, or the monolithic status of the "divine man" figure in antiquity. In discussing the latter question, for instance, he does not even mention the penetrating and well-researched works of Tiede (his own student) and Holladay. Even though Koester insists that his work is not a technical introduction, his choices tell us more about where he is in his thinking than how he got there or even what the current state of play is. In this way Luke is dated about 125, Acts ten years later. The *Gospel of Thomas* is rather early, the product of Christian mystery associations. Canonical Acts, the *Acts of Peter* and the *Acts of Paul* were all written about the same time, and all made use of cycles of legends relating to Peter and Paul.

But the most astonishing feature of this two-volume work is the place accorded to Jesus. This work of almost 850 pages dealing with the rise of early Christianity manages to devote to Jesus Christ himself precisely thirteen pages. I was immediately reminded of the similar ratio in the *Theology of the New Testament* written by Rudolf Bultmann, Koester's mentor and the person to whom this work is dedicated. It is not only a very skeptical but a very old-fashioned Biblical criticism that takes such an approach today. Every hint of redaction is presumed to be historical fabrication, and trajectories of theological development are sketched in with an aplomb that can only be judged methodologically naive.

There is another deep-seated problem in this work that again reflects the thought of Bultmann. Koester sees himself not only as an historian committed to a principally anti-supernaturalistic historiography but as a Church theologian concerned with living issues of faith, with the "ought" as well as with the "that." But his self-perception as theologian should have told him that there is more to knowledge and moral choice than putatively "neutral" observations and synthesis of historical phenomena, or his self-perception as an essentially secular historian should have told him that his theological bias is unfounded. The tension is unresolved throughout the work, but it leaves the impression that either Koester's position is epistemologically bankrupt or else he actually believes that there is some theological canon that can be uncovered from the historical process itself—without telling us what it is. I would dearly love to know which of these alternative positions Koester occupies.

In short, this is an important work and a stimulating synthesis, a mine of useful information and a reasonably self-consistent model, but an erratic guide to early Christianity.

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