

Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World. By David E. Aune. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 522 pp., \$29.95.

Every once in a while a book comes along that must be read by anyone who wishes to address the same subject. This book belongs to that class.

Aune, professor of religion at Saint Xavier College in Chicago, begins with a survey of previous treatments of early Christian prophecy, focusing especially on the problem of method. To gain proper objectivity it is necessary to compare closely the form, function, content and social setting of all claims to prophecy in the Mediterranean world—Greco-Roman as well as Jewish. It is especially necessary, Aune insists, to avoid making certain kinds of prophecy the standard by which all others are judged. Too many approaches to the NT make value judgments that are primarily theological (in Aune's usage, this almost always has connotations of subjectivity) as opposed to historical. He aims therefore to adopt a strictly historical method himself, in order to offer a critical assessment of the various forms of prophecy practiced in the Mediterranean world from somewhat before Christ to about the mid-second century. Along the way Aune carefully defines his terms. Prophecy is that form of speech in which it is understood that God or a god speaks through a human intermediary. Divination "may be defined as the art or science of interpreting symbolic messages from the gods." On the other hand, oracles are "messages from the gods in human language, received as statements from a god, usually in response to inquiries" (p. 23). These sweeping definitions are progressively refined: Distinctions are made between technical divination and natural divination, and so forth.

Aune's well-known mastery of Greco-Roman sources is put to good use in the second and third chapters, where he discusses Greco-Roman prophecy—first in terms of oracular places and persons, then in terms of the form and function of Greco-Roman oracles. No similarly comprehensive analysis of the forms of Greco-Roman oracles has ever been attempted; these two chapters alone are worth the price of the book. The fourth chapter assesses ancient Israelite prophecy, carefully noting parallels to and distinctions from prophecy found in the Greco-Roman world. The fifth chapter surveys prophecy in early Judaism, and considerable energy is expended in debunking the view that Jews in the time of Jesus understood prophecy to have ceased, the Spirit apparently withdrawn until the onset of the messianic age. The next two chapters analyze the prophetic role of Jesus and the actual form and content of his prophecies. The eighth chapter assesses the character of early Christian prophecy, including discussion of such questions as who prophesied in early Christianity, the relationship between Christian prophets and other Christian leaders, distinctions commonly made between itinerant and resident prophets, the evaluation of prophecy, and the like. The ninth chapter criticizes the thesis that Christian prophets passed on

messages from the exalted Jesus—messages that were then read back by the Church into the teaching of the historical Jesus. Aune finds major arguments for this view, those of Käsemann and Boring, to be weak and inconclusive at best. The chapter is important to the flow of his argument because Aune goes on to formulate criteria by which we may discover examples of early Christian prophecy imbedded in the NT documents, and of course if he were wrong on this point his criteria would have to change quite a bit. The criteria themselves are set forth in chap. 10, and chaps. 10 and 11 survey all the passages in the NT (chap. 10) and in early Christian literature to the middle of the second century (chap. 11) that Aune judges are potential candidates for his list of early Christian prophecies. These are subjected to rigorous assessment in light of the criteria he has developed, and the survivors are then set in the framework of the matrix of prophecy in the Mediterranean world. The last chapter sums up this treatment and analyzes the basic features of early Christian prophetic speech. An appendix differentiates between Christian prophecy and charismatic exegesis.

The work and its voluminous notes are simply invaluable. This is not to say that every page commands agreement. Aune adopts more or less “standard” critical views on many issues (Ephesians and the pastorals are not written by Paul, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah are postexilic, and so forth), and sometimes these views have an impact on Aune’s judgments of the broader issues. Yet at the same time Aune on occasion adopts minority viewpoints with refreshing frankness. For example, his brief remarks on the closing of the OT canon (p. 106) and his treatment of the relationship between early Christian prophecy and the sayings of Jesus (discussed above) demonstrate that his judgments are not simply along party lines. The book is extraordinarily well-written and therefore easy to read. Only rarely is there a breach in the logic of the argument or in the applicability of the texts cited to the argument at hand. For instance, on p. 203, 1 Cor 12:28-29 and Eph 4:11 do not themselves demonstrate the supralocal nature of leadership roles such as apostle, prophet and teacher. On pp. 51-52, in trying to demonstrate that it would be inappropriate to trace the ambiguity of Greek oracles “to cult officials trying to protect the reputation of their sanctuary, or to political considerations,” Aune argues: “Not all oracles were enigmatic. Questions regarding ritual protocol, for example, were usually answered clearly and unambiguously. The surviving oracles which have been preserved in literary settings are hardly representative of the normal kind of oracular response which was received in antiquity.” True—but the fact that not all oracles were enigmatic does not itself address the question as to possible motives of deception among oracular officials. In fact one might argue that because, from the evidence available, oracles dealing with ritual questions prove the least enigmatic whereas oracles dealing with political, military and personal questions prove the most enigmatic, there is some reason to think that cult officials were prepared to give unambiguous responses in areas where they could scarcely be controverted and that they retreated to more ambiguous responses where the subsequent facts of history could in retrospect cloud their authority. This is not to say that the enigmatic character of many oracles was not itself perceived as evidence of the divine; it is only to say that this fact cannot by itself account for the differences in degree of ambiguity. Or again, on p. 207, where Aune argues that the presentation of John’s prophetic role in the Apocalypse should not be thought unique but rather in line with the nature of prophecy commonly accepted in the Christian community, the argument is not as strong as it might be. Aune argues that John could be accepted as a Christian prophet in the Christian communities he addresses “*only if his modes of speech and behavior were recognizable as characteristically prophetic*” (italics his). True—but Paul can cast himself simply as “a man in Christ” even when he is claiming that he received an extraordinary experience (2 Cor 12:1-10). Paul is concerned to avoid the triumphalism of the Corinthians he is addressing, and Aune himself argues that John is interested in flattening hierarchical distinctions in the Apocalypse. But Paul is certainly not undermining his authority by casting himself in 2 Corinthians 12 as “a man in

Christ." Elsewhere he is quite capable of insisting on the authority bound up with his apostleship, and, similarly, that John calls himself a prophet does not by itself determine whether John and the communities he is addressing perceive in him and his message an authority, content and style that go somewhat beyond that of more common prophets. Again, on several occasions Aune seems to deny the possibility that distinctions exist in some particular category by showing the semantic sweep of the word or category involved. For instance, in his treatment of "apostle" (pp. 202-203) he shows the sweep of the semantic range of the word but does not exegetically assess those passages that seem to mean that there are apostles and apostles. Moreover in this instance his critical stance prompts him to overlook some rather important evidence from the synoptic gospels: Though they are doubtless written after Paul's first writing, they insist that Jesus appointed twelve men to be disciples in some special sense and that he himself designated them "apostles."

The historical method Aune adopts, though very powerful in setting up objective criteria in order to allow careful comparisons to be made, occasionally leads him astray. Because Aune refuses to make any distinctions whatever between the formal categorization of false prophecy and true prophecy, OT prophesying can be said to include self-flagellation (1 Kgs 18:28-29; Zech 13:6). I am uncertain that the latter reference has any relevance to the discussion at all, and the former refers to the prophesyings of the prophets of the Baals. Of course these prophesyings occur in the course of "OT" history, but it is not "OT" prophecy in the sense that it is bound up with the religion of Yahweh. The point is not a minor one: Later on the precise distinction is occasionally obliterated. Similarly the category "magic ritual" is stretched to the breaking point (p. 100).

As we have seen, Aune forcefully argues that prophecy did not cease in the period from the last of the writing prophets to the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus. There is a sense in which he is surely right. But having made the point he does not interact with his own repeated discussion of the many differences between prophesyings in the OT canon and in the later period (see pp. 106-112 ff., 139, 153, 195, etc.). The failure to attempt some integration has some bearing on Aune's treatment of the relative degrees of authority in OT prophets, Josephus, NT prophets, apostles, and so forth—for apparently the prophets of the late second-temple period saw themselves in a different light and gave utterances that were formally and materially different from their antecedents. Nor does Aune point out that on his own evidence the evaluation of a prophecy in the OT period turns out to be an evaluation of the prophet himself, but that in the Pauline letters an evaluation of the prophecy uttered within the Christian community does not necessarily call in question the status of the prophet but only of that particular prophecy. There are, I think, some important entailments in these distinctions for our assessment of authority status in the early Church.

But these quibbles are not meant to detract from the immense learning found in this volume. No one can responsibly address the subject of early Christian prophecy without wrestling with this important work.

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