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Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity [Review]

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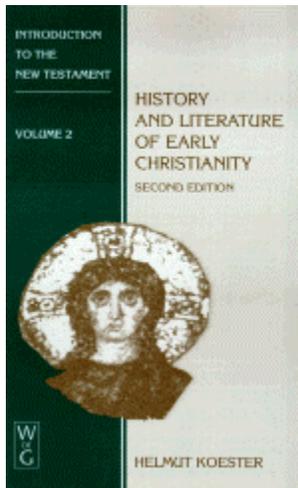
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Koester, Helmut

Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity

Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000. Pp. 375, Paperback, \$27.95, ISBN 3110149702.

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The publication of this book completes the second edition of Helmut Koester's important two-volume introduction to early Christian literature and history, published originally in 1982. Like the second edition of the first volume, which appeared in 1995, this edition seeks to make current the now classic and well-known introductory volume, while maintaining its structure and organization. After covering the formation of the canon, text critical issues and an all too brief introduction to methods—only source, form, tradition, narrative and rhetorical criticism are discussed, the latter two being new to this edition—texts are discussed in chronological and geographical sequence, beginning with traditions about John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul, then covering Palestine and Syria (where he locates both the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and John), and Asia, Macedonia, Greece and Rome. The book is less an introduction to New Testament writings than it is an attempt to paint a comprehensive picture of the development of early Christianity, creating a map of the relationships between the various texts, both canonical and non-canonical. Although one can disagree with the shape of the map and where some of the texts are placed in relation to others, it is extraordinarily useful as a place to start or a point of reference.

The text of this second edition has been edited to flow and reader more smoothly. It has also been expanded by incorporating many of the scholarly resources that have become available since the publication of first edition, such as (the now fully published) materials from the Nag Hammadi library and important recent discussion on the genre of the Acts of the Apostles. The bibliographies that accompany each section, usually divided into Text, Studies, Commentaries and History of Scholarship, have been updated to

include recent works, some of which replace items that were listed in the first edition. In addition to several new tables—for example, a comparison of the contents of the Gospels of Mark and John and a comparison of vocabulary unique to John in comparison with the synoptics—there is now a list of frequently cited texts as well as an index of authors discussed. The latter, however, does not include authors listed in the bibliography and contains very few contributions in the last few decades. No new illustrations or pictures appear in this edition.

As with the first edition, the breadth and scope of the work are both an advantage and disadvantage, presenting a wealth of information that may be spread too thin in some places. The book is important and useful as a summary of historical-critical approaches to the New Testament filtered through Koester's insight and erudition. However, the historical focus sometimes shortchanges other questions; texts are approached for what they can contribute historically, focusing on author, date and the degree of usefulness in the historical project and it is sometimes unclear what criteria are used to determine the latter. The Acts of the Apostles, for example, is divided into material that has been composed and shaped by the author and material that is historically useful, listing a number of passages, including information about Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37 and Steven (Acts 6:8-9; 7:54, 57-58a) (p. 322). Bibliographical references would have been welcome in the numerous places where Koester makes rather bold conjectures and in places where he navigates opposing interpretations, settling on one without allowing the reader to follow up.

The updated and expanded edition of this important work will ensure that it retains its well-deserved place in the library of students of the New Testament for years to come.