

BOOK REVIEW

Harding, Mark, and Alanna Nobbs (eds.), *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). xix + 455 pp. Pbk. \$55.00.

This volume is a compilation of eighteen separate essays from seventeen contributors that delineate the content and context of the Gospels. This contrasts with the traditional approach to New Testament introduction that separates the sections according to authorship, date and origins, though these issues are addressed throughout. The editors also clarify in the foreword that this volume is aimed at an undergraduate level in theology or history, but graduate students and scholars will also benefit from the topics addressed and the bibliographies that are appended to each chapter. Since the book began with that caveat, my expectations were quite low, anticipating simpler discussions of basic issues in Gospel studies similar to those in other undergraduate textbooks. However, the topics discussed usually require the reader to have at least a working knowledge of the basic biblical issues. In spite of this possible overreach in their ambition, the editors do seem to fulfill their objective in addressing issues that most New Testament introductory volumes do not, and in so doing, target a broader audience than they intended. In contrast to the seeming trend today of underreaching one's audiences, they should be commended for high expectations from their readers.

The volume is broken into five main sections. The first section (Chapter 1) surveys the archaeology of the Hellenistic period (167 BC–AD 135). The second (Chapters 2–3) focuses on the text of the New Testament, i.e. manuscript and language issues respectively. The third (Chapters 4–6) describes the political and social contexts, along with an essay on Second Temple Judaism. The fourth (Chapters 7–9) compares the Gospels with other contemporary literature. The final and longest section (Chapters 10–18) reviews various aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, covering issues such as Jesus' identity, distinctive

features of the Gospels, the content of his teaching, and various narrative portions.

The opening chapter, entitled ‘The Archaeology of Palestine’, is an interesting way to begin the volume for two reasons. First, it is surprising that the only chapter that exists as its own section covers the archaeology of the New Testament, which is not discussed as commonly in New Testament studies as it is in Old Testament studies. This brings a unique approach to this textbook in comparison to other New Testament introductions. But secondly and more importantly, there is more discussion in this chapter of geography and history than what the title actually proposes. While there is some very informative material on the background, history and geography of the New Testament (specifically of the Gospels), there is not as much discussion of archaeology as I would have hoped. My expectation was to read about the various artifacts and papyri that have been discovered to date that help elucidate the social milieu and cultural context of the New Testament period (such as the documentary and literary papyri—the type of work Deissmann did in the last century). Yet, there is more discussion of the various Herods and the villages of Galilee than actual papyri and artifacts. To be fair, the chapter is not completely devoid of archaeological discussion—there are several places where the excavation of certain key cities is mentioned, and there are some very helpful insights from some findings, such as the various skeletons found near Jerusalem that illustrate the dreadful conditions of that time. One particular skeleton has been found that evidences some characteristics of Roman crucifixion, which further illuminates the process of Jesus’ own crucifixion. And while the author also identifies some manuscript discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents, I had hoped more space would be devoted to summarize what these important documents represent for New Testament studies. It might have been more beneficial and relevant to include this chapter in the section entitled ‘The Setting’.

The second section (Chapters 2–3) is on the text and language of the New Testament. For a volume aimed at undergraduates, discussing the issues of textual criticism and papyri is quite commendable. In fact, this section is a rather detailed survey of textual criticism, reviewing some important third- and fourth-century manuscripts, various approaches to methodology, and contemporary perspectives on the early (i.e. second century) Gospel text. The reader is expected to be familiar

with terms like ‘majuscule’ and ‘minuscule’ manuscripts, concepts that even some entry-level graduate students may not be familiar with. Again, while containing some important information, the chapter reaches beyond the level set out by the editors.

The next part of this volume (Chapters 4–6) focuses on the political and social contexts of the Gospels. The author of Chapter 4 reminds us that ‘separation of church and state’ is a distinctly Western mindset that was foreign to the world of the New Testament. In effect, Jesus’ proclamation of the ‘kingdom of God’ had massive ramifications for his hearers in light of the political milieu of his day. The author outlines a brief history of the Palestinian area and its subservience to Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. It is not surprising that by the inception of Jesus’ ministry, the Jewish nation was more than eager to be freed from any oppression by the surrounding powers. This explains why the Jews were so amazed by the politically freeing power Jesus potentially had. Next, Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of social and economic factors that helps elucidate the world of the New Testament, particularly Jesus’ discourses regarding the poor. The section concludes in Chapter 6 with an important discussion of Second Temple Judaism (or *Judaisms*, as the author notes, due to the plurality of ways in which the Jewish faith was practiced) including a summary of the Maccabean War, the various sects of Judaism (e.g. Pharisees, Essenes, etc.), and the historiography of those such as Josephus, which all assist in understanding the context of the New Testament world. It appears this section is where the editors’ objectives begin to come to fruition.

The following section (Chapters 7–9) describes the Gospels as they relate to the other relevant literature, i.e. the Old Testament, other early Christian documents, and non-canonical works. The first chapter in this section introduces the discussion of the New Testament use of the Old Testament, including the recent idea of intertextuality, noting the popular terms ‘quotation’, ‘allusion’ and ‘echo’ to refer to the degrees of reference by which the Old Testament is found in the New Testament. The next chapter discusses how the Gospels were formed and what other concurrent documents supplemented (or at least tried to supplement) the Gospels, namely the apocryphal Gospels (e.g. the Gospels of Thomas and Peter). There is also a discussion of even more ‘Gospels’ that either supplement or supplant the canonical Gospels (e.g.

1–2 Clement and the *Didache*). The discussion is concise and comprehensive and fits in well with the aim of the editors.

The last and longest section (Chapters 10–18) deals with some of the more thematic issues related to the Gospels. The first chapter in this section is on the historical Jesus. This is a succinct yet comprehensive discussion on the historiography of the ‘historical Jesus’, including more recent, up-to-date material on this important topic, such as a discussion of the recent work of Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eye-witnesses* (2006). There are other chapters that contain very interesting and unique discussions for an introductory work, such as the chapter on the parables of Jesus (what function they serve in the Gospels) and the miracles of Jesus (the various views regarding their nature). This type of discussion, to my knowledge, is not typical in undergraduate introductions and is a fresh perspective on some important issues in the Gospels.

I now wish to address some overall strengths and weaknesses of the volume. The first strength is that the editors accomplish their aim in creating a unique New Testament introduction. I commend the editors of this volume for their unique approach to such a volume and for their ability to compile various essays into a cohesive unit. While topics may overlap (which is inevitable in an introduction to the New Testament that has multiple authors), the material is organized uniquely and some issues usually not addressed are presented. One example of this has been mentioned above already, the parables of Jesus, but another example is the discussion of some of the textual forms of the Old Testament, including a summary of the Masoretic Text, the LXX, and the Aramaic Targums, as well as subsequent literature such as Midrash and Pesher. Though some may argue that these lack direct relevance for Gospel study (or at least question devoting so much space to them), these nevertheless are issues the early church had to deal with and remain an important part of historical and textual study.

Another strength of this volume is the comprehensive examination of proposed subjects. Each author tends to give a detailed analysis of their own topic. I appreciate the depth, for example, of the discussion on parables, particularly in describing various approaches to interpreting them throughout history, as well as the significance of the parables in hermeneutics (i.e. their role in Jesus’ teaching). I also appreciate the author’s analysis that the parables of Jesus are not merely ‘nice stories

designed to educate' (p. 370), but they are presented to evoke a response from the hearers, that is, to have some 'shock' value.

Having stated the strengths of this volume, here are a couple weaknesses. First is that the subject matter and depth surpass the undergraduate level, missing the goal the editors were aiming for. A student who is not acquainted with issues pertaining to textual criticism or intertextuality may easily be lost in the technical nature of the volume. For example, though intertextuality is certainly an important subject and requires response and interaction, it does not qualify as an area that needs detailed attention for an undergraduate introduction. Furthermore, while textual criticism should indeed be included in this volume, the reference to Greek terminology should not be included in an undergraduate introduction when English terms are sufficient.

Secondly, because of the multi-authored nature of this volume, the chapters vary significantly in level of scholarship, style and relative content. This is simply the inevitable byproduct of having multiple authors write in a single volume, but the differences seem to be significant enough to warrant mention. For example, on the one hand, Chapter 6 on the Gospels and Second Temple Judaism is a detailed but succinct overview of the history containing some helpful information pertaining to the subject of the chapter. It is logically divided with various sub-headings. On the other hand, Chapter 3 on the language of the New Testament contains no identifiable sub-divisions, although this is not to say that there is no logical structure to the essay. It would be helpful to the reader to have some sub-headings included. For example, the author's main objective is to examine the contribution of two main sources for understanding the language of the New Testament: (1) documentary papyri and (2) inscriptions (p. 63). Those simple headings would have sufficed, including possibly headings for introduction and conclusion.

Despite some criticisms, however, this volume is a helpful and up-to-date resource for some issues in the New Testament, and it contains a variant organizational structure that most introductions do not utilize. There are many useful articles in this volume that contain detailed information that helps elucidate some of the major perspectives on a particular subject. I would suggest that the best use of this volume is actually at the graduate level, for students who have a basic understanding of introductory New Testament issues. Perhaps in a subsequent edition of this volume, the editors could consider omitting their statement

indicating their targeting of an undergraduate audience. I think everyone will benefit from using it as a supplementary resource to the more traditional introductions to the New Testament. In that, the editors have achieved their aim.

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