Book Review of: Helmut Koester's *Ancient Christian Gospels*

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Bibliographical Information

Koester, Helmut. *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development*. Harrisburg, PA. Trinity Press International. 1990.

Biographical Information

Helmut Koester was born December 18, 1926 in Hamburg, Germany.[1] After graduating from a Berlin high school in 1943, he served in the German Army in the anti-aircraft division and later in the German Navy. In early 1945, he was captured by the Allies and held as a POW. At the conclusion of World War II, he was released.

Following WW II, Koester attended the University of Marburg. There, he trained under Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Balla and Wilhem Maurer. He received his undergraduate degree from the university in 1950.

While working on his doctorate and serving as assistant Pastor for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover (1951-54), Koester married Gisela Harrassowitz in 1953. In 1954, he received a doctor of theology degree from the University of Marburg. Shortly thereafter, he received an invitation to join the faculty of the University of Heidelberg as research and teaching assistant. He received a promotion to assistant professor (Privatdozent) in 1956. He served at Heidelberg until 1959.

In 1959, Koester received an invitation to serve as visiting assistant professor at Harvard University Divinity School. While there, Harvard conferred upon Koester an honorary doctorate (1959)[2]. Thus, it is not surprising that at the conclusion of his service as visiting professor, he received an invitation to remain as permanent faculty. Upon his acceptance, he was named as Associate professor of New Testament Studies. He served this role until 1963 when he was named the John H. Morison Professor of New Testament Studies as well as the Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History in which roles he continues to serve, albeit in an emeritus type role.[3]

Koester has enjoyed three research fellowships. In 1963-64, Koester was named as the Guggenheim Fellow. In 1971-72 and again in 1978-79, he was named to the American Council of Learned Societies.

Koester has participated in a variety of scholastic groups. He is a member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, the American Society of Oriental Research and the Societas Novi Testamenti Studorium. In

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[1] There is precious little biographical information on Dr. Koester. The information presented here is drawn primarily from his *Curriculum Vitae* this author obtained from the Harvard Divinity School.

[2] Koester has also received an honorary doctorate from University of Geneva in 1989.

[3] In the correspondence with Harvard Divinity School, this author received information that the emeritus role has been altered to represent him as a research professor.

addition, he is a member of Society of Biblical Literature. In 1991, he served as president of this prestigious guild.

Currently, Koester continues his role as the John H. Morison Research Professor of New Testament Studies and Winn Research Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School.

Thesis of Book

In the preface to *Ancient Christian Gospels* (*ACG*), Koester (hereafter K) states his long-standing desire to write on the subject of early Christian literature. Encouraged by his mentor, R. Bultmann, K cites a keen lifelong interest in the topic (xxix). The 1959 publication of the Gospel of Thomas further encouraged his curiosity. Furthermore, K's discovery of Walter Bauer's writing *Rechtglåubigkeit* und *Ketzerei im åltesten Christentum*[4], referred to by K as "epochal," provided the necessary impetus for the work of *ACG*. Thus, after a career of research in this field, it is not surprising that he should take up such a discussion at a later stage in his career.

K makes clear that *ACG* is still a work in progress since the debate regarding these writings is far from over. The conclusions that he arrives at are a result of his own study and the study of those who trained him. Furthermore, he makes clear his intention to deal with the issues of the ancient writings, but his work is not intended to be comprehensive. Such a task is simply too great. Thus, the treatment at hand stands as a selective compilation.

K states his thesis for *ACG* quite succinctly: "My interest is the historical development of ancient traditions and writings, and . . . to discuss such important problems as the historical Jesus and the literary dimensions of traditions about Jesus [as well as] the process of the collection of materials of ancient books" (xxxii). Thus, K premise is to trace the process of all ancient Christian gospels, without prejudice or predisposition toward the canonical collection,[5] from oral tradition to the form known at present.

Summary of Contents

Section One

K segments his work into five sections. The first section ascertains the definition of the term "gospel" as well as the usage of the term ευαγγελιον. An excellent introduction to this discussion, K addresses how this term is used in Paul, the Gospels, the Apostolic fathers (1-5).

Appropriately, K points out ευαγγελιον was not originally used as a title for a body of writing, but, in nominative form, as an announcement of good news. In verbal form, it

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[4] Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

[5] Despite the fact that K's bias and predisposition is obvious in many places.

is a title for bringing good news (5, 6). Thus, the name was adopted as a descriptive designation naming the contents by this title.

In the Pauline corpus, K states that the term was used in a technical formulaic sense implying the death, burial and the sacrificial role of Christ in the church (7, 13). This formulaic sense was used by much of the early church. Thus, the term ευαγγελιον in the apostolic fathers also carried a technical sense in the earliest traditions of the church. This, K explains, stands as a direct result of the implications of oral traditions that were overwhelmingly prevalent in the late first and early second centuries (14).

K attempts to solidify his contention of the role of oral tradition in the ευαγγελιον by demonstrating its use and meaning in 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas and Polycarp of Smyrna's writings. Each of these use the concept, if not the term, ευαγγελιον. Thus, their use and development of the ευαγγελιον serves as a bridge from the oral tradition to a more formalized, possibly even redacted, gospel. This concept plays a critical role in later discussion for K as he continually demonstrates an affinity for pre-sources foundational to the canonical gospels.

Concluding the first section is a final, significant contribution of *ACG*. K's discussion regarding the development of the concept of "gospel" in the Nag Hammadi library is as thoroughly researched and presented as any available. K's special affinity for the Gospel of Thomas makes his emphasis on the Nag Hammadi even less surprising (21). K deals with those books that have a minimal role in canonical development, such as the highly Gnostic Gospel of Truth despite the fact it does not include the term ευαγγελιον (22), in his pursuit of the development of the same.

How then did these books come to called Gospels? Since each of these dealt with the concept of the kergyma in a way completely unlike any other genre of literature, it was a natural development for them to take on a name reflective of their contents (25-27). The first to term them as "Gospels", according to K, was Marcion (36). Shortly thereafter, Justin Martyr, maintaining the record of the gospels as reliable records of the "memoirs of the apostles", referred to them as gospels (37-39). Thus, the records of the gospels mark the development a factual and reliable account of the ευαγγελιον and thus, gospel.

K addresses the issue of discernment between the gospels to define how the canonical gospels were included as well as how others, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter, were excluded. Here, K calls for a forfeiture of presumptions in this examination and expands the criterion for inclusion of gospels.[6] The fundamental criterion K employed for inclusion as a gospel is founded upon each book containing the essential *kergyma* of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. This broad definition allows him to include many writings apocryphal works, such as the Secret Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas. He defines those gospels that are to be excluded, such as the Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of the Egyptians and the Sophia of Jesus Christ (45-49).

Section Two

[6] Except his own presuppositions, of course.

In the Section Two, K moves the heart of his volume as he addresses the collection of the Sayings of Jesus. Communication of the gospel message was carried by means of groups of sayings that carried enormous authority within the Christian community. These sayings, grouped in various wisdom forms (such as K asserts, as that which surfaces in the Corinthian correspondence. Cf. 1 Cor. 2 and 4), came to the gospel writers as foundation stones upon which they could build their own accounts. Therefore, in K's view, the gospel writers were mostly redactors of oral materials rather than authors in the truest sense of the word. Interestingly, K does not take that issue up at this point, but leaves it aside in favor of discussing Paul and his use of the sayings of Jesus.

Crucial to understanding the Jesus sayings in the Pauline corpus is K's contention that Paul is not dependent on the sayings of Jesus (51). Paul, according to K, took a mission of an eschatological nature founded on the death and resurrection of Christ as the "turning point for the ages" (51). Thus, for Paul and his letters, the sayings of Jesus do not play a role in the salvation event (61).

Returning to the issue of the sayings of Jesus in the gospel concept, K begins his discussion with the Gospel of Thomas (hereafter Thomas). Following an excellent introduction of background information on Thomas (70-84), K develops his hypothesis that Thomas represents some of the earliest and most reliable groups of the sayings of Jesus. This, K contends, is in spite of the fact that it is not a gospel in the technical sense of the term (89). In effort to prove his hypothesis, K compares Thomas with the canonical gospels in painstaking fashion. With consistency, K favors Thomas over the canonical gospels (and, of course, Q which K contends most closely equivocates the Gospel of Luke, using the references as hyphenated (e.g. Q / L 7:48); Cf. 87-89). Moreover, he asserts that because Thomas lacks the cohesive narrative and the "pedantic and certainly secondary enlargements" of the canonical gospels (as well as the apocalyptic materials) Thomas must be the earliest and most reliable account of Jesus' sayings (94-95). If Thomas is not the closest to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, it is assuredly earlier than the Gospel of Mark (109-110). Several factors mediate against this possibility. Not the least of the difficulties for this view are Thomas' uncertain heritage and a date that is even more uncertain.[7] Therefore, despite the quantum leap necessary, K remains steadfast in his acceptance of Thomas. This is clear just in the simple amount of attention it receives in his text (75-128).

The second collection of the sayings of Jesus is the "Synoptic Sayings Source" that K associates with Q (128, 166). Following a brief and somewhat dissatisfactory assessment of the Synoptic Problem (specifically the Holtzmann Two-Source theory and Griesbach hypothesis[8]), K asserts the existence of Q and a Pre-Q document (134, 141). The Pre-Q document is necessary to explain the similarities between Matthew and Luke independent from Mark. Thus, the production of Matthew and Mark must have used a Pre-Markan Q

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[7] K does address the origin and dating of Thomas, although he does not assign it a specific date, simply late first century) to shore up his argument. Cf. 111.

[8] K repeatedly asserts his certainty in Markan priority, as if he was reassuring not only his reader, but himself as well. He also criticizes the Griesbach hypothesis on the basis that too many logical jumps are necessary to hold this view (128-129).

for the production of their writings (166). A true Holtzmannian, K does not even entertain the notion of another view.

In much of the following section centered on the mythical Q document, K is indebted to J. Kloppenborg citing him frequently. K asserts that Mark, John and Q all originated in western Syria or Palestine, a view also held by J. Kloppenborg (161). In keeping ith the attention showered upon Thomas, Q receives no less. The importance of this hypothesis for K is demonstrated thoroughly by the amount of attention given to the existence and prominence of a Q document and Pre-Q (128-171).

Section Three

In section three, K speaks to the development of the concept of Gospel from Dialogues and Narratives to the Gospel of John. This section, taking the argument for Q and Thomas as legitimate players in the early development of the canonical gospels, attempts to demonstrate a thorough dependence of John on these same sources with one addition. However, before K addresses the Fourth Gospel, he finds it necessary to include two other extra-canonical writings from the Nag Hammadi Library. The Dialogue of the Savior (hereafter Dialogue) draws on several of the same sources as the canonical gospel writings, K says, and deserves the attention given to other ancient writings (173). K confesses that Dialogue contains no elements of a gospel in the technical sense, but still includes it. K does attempt to assure the reader that he does not contend for Dialogue to be included in the canon. Nevertheless, it plays a significant role in his understanding of canonical development in his early dating of it and its oral background. Thus, throughout the Dialogue, K seeks and finds parallels to canonical gospels, as if to validate one or the other by its apposite use (176-187).

The Aporcryphon of James (hereafter AJ) stands as another connective between the oral transmission of the text and the formalized compilation of the text (189). Purported to be the remembrances of the disciples, this work attempts to speak of these memories as well as personal encounter with Christ (189). K readily admits AJ's thoroughly Gnostic nature, specifically, its distinct emphasis on knowledge and especially secret knowledge. Nevertheless, K asserts, it can be considered a valuable tool in the hands of scholars for discerning a step in canonical development by its very existence. Again, K sets out a myriad of parallels, many of which could just as easily be common Judaic or Christian motifs (cf. 191). Of interest is the leap K makes when he compares the AJ to Thomas in an attempt to validate one as authentic by means of the other (192).

In addition, in section three, K addresses the issue of the existence a miracle cantenae as fundamental in gospel development. Closely akin to the Synoptic Sayings Source, this was somewhat reminiscent of the Semeia source, which he connects here takes up at a later time (204, 251). These miracles may represent what were the earliest oral traditions regarding Jesus and thus must be examined careful. K hypothesizes extracting these from the gospel materials to view them as an independent source.

In keeping with his views on the miracle cantenae, K suggests the Papyrus Egerton 2 (hereafter Egerton) ought to be viewed as an independent source or at least drawn from a source common to the gospels. Similar to the Semeia source and, by extension, a possible forerunner to the Gospel of John (206-215), Egerton deserves similar attention. Following a very well done introduction to this work, K strays in attempting to date this

at a time most beneficial to his argument. However, hypotheses such as these grow tiresome as he again produces a plethora of citations in an attempt to prove the role of Egerton in early canonical development. While it is a possibility, to accept it without restriction is premature at best.

The last of these so-called gospels is the Gospel of Peter (hereafter GP). The introduction of GP is masterful and allows insight into why this in the discussion at any stage. However, K again shows his penchant for extra-canonical sources, as he seems to desire to place in league with canonical development (220-235).

The heart of the third section is the division on the transmission of the Four canonical gospels. K grants to them their canonical status and cites same as the reason for their broad inclusion in so many manuscripts (240). Nevertheless, he does not at that time address why they were included and why others were not, a crucial piece of the puzzle sidestepped in several places. Tracing them from their earliest forms (P52 and 45; cf. 241), K draws their heritage through the first several centuries to demonstrate their solid role. Unfortunately, this section is only three pages in length (241-244).

Without hesitation, K addresses the role and composition of the Gospel of John. K makes clear that he agrees with the early date it has received by some, but stops short of saying that it was received as a whole. Rather, he suggests John[9] drew from sources that had been circulating (246-252). The most significant of these is the Semeia Source (251). K defines this source as a "composition with a message: Jesus is the divine man who strides the face of the earth displaying supernatural power, beginning with the water to wine experience" (251).

K states clearly his belief that John and Mark share the same source for their Passion narratives. However, is such a view necessary? This hypothesis is not necessary if both John and Mark (or at least Peter) were eyewitnesses to the Passion (253-255). Again, K demonstrates his thorough kinship with the extra-canonical books as he compares them in an apparent unconvincing attempt to validate their pre-existence before John (257-271).

Section Four

In section four, K addresses the Synoptic Gospels specifically. Unfortunately, this is one of the weaker sections of the book. His attention toward the canonical gospels borders on boredom when compared to his hypothesizing and imagination when dealing with the extra-canonical writings, specifically Thomas.

One of K's more interesting suggestions regarding the Gospel of Mark is his contention for an "UrMarkus", a primitive Pre-Mark that existed before the canonical Mark (284-285). He further asserts his belief that the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark* of Clement of Alexandria is that "UrMarkus" (285-286, 295-303).

In the interest of completeness, K addresses the issue of infancy and childhood narratives (303-314). To these, he relegates a status of interesting reading but little more. These are representative, according to K, of the legends which grew up around Jesus, Mary and others.

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[9] Not surprisingly, K does not state the identity of the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Finally, K arrives at his assessment of the Gospel of Matthew and Luke. While he does an admirable and largely well-stated review of each, they both pale in comparison to the amount of attention he lavished upon both Thomas and the Q document.[10] For both gospels, the charts and parallels provided by K can be valuable instead of finding a gospel synopsis, especially in his desire to demonstrate an interdependence of sources for both.

As for Matthew, despite K's statements questioning Matthew's authorship of this gospel, his treatment is largely in keeping with tradition and, of course, the two-source hypothesis (Griesbach is not even mentioned in this segment). This section has the feel of being adapted from a previous work since it seems to lack some of the sharpness and clarity found in the balance of the book.

Concerning the Gospel of Luke, despite the fact it lacks the attestation of some of the other gospels (332), it stands as fulfillment of the sources presented to the Evangelist. Again, K emphasis on Markan priority is evident in his charts of Luke, drawing parallels to Q and to L, the unique portion of Luke. In K's defense, his conclusion regarding Luke demonstrates his affinity for the culmination of these sources in Luke as he states "the Gospel of Luke is not only the foundation of the Christian mission; it is also its paradigm".

Section Five

In the fifth section, K marks the development of the harmonization of the Canonical Gospels. Unfortunately, K's underlying reliance on the priority on Markan colors this section decisively.

In two divisions, K deals with the issue of harmonization of the canonical gospels. First, in 2 Clement[11], K attempts to demonstrate a dependence of this writing on the canonical Gospels. Whether it was the intention of the author of 2 Clement to harmonize passages of canonical gospels is questionable. However, what is not questionable is his knowledge and use of those gospels, further validating their date and usage in the early church (349-360).

Second, in K's section on the gospel quotations from Justin Martyr is especially interesting (361-402). Justin's knowledge and use of the gospels is extensive. However, much of that which K cites as harmonization may be considered as a free quotation or a quote from the memory of an oral tradition (374).

Of course, no assessment of gospel harmonization would be complete without addressing Tatian's *Diatesseron.* In wisdom, K allowed Dr. William L. Petersen to write this concluding section (403-434). While different in style and flavor, Petersen's treatment is one of the best features of the closing section.

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[10] Matthew is covered in slightly more than sixteen pages (314-331) and Luke in similar fashion with seventeen pages (332-348).

[11] K does not address the issue of authorship of 2 Clement.

Critical Evaluation of *ACG*

K's work in *ACG* is a masterful treatment of the field. It provides insight from a lifetime of research and study regarding the topic. The research K has done in assembling this work is nothing short of remarkable. He draws upon his own rich wealth of knowledge, but also the abundance of the scholarly community at large.

However, a word of caution: it is not for the novice or for the faint of heart. Presuppositions abound throughout the writing. These presuppositions detract from the book in some cases. Furthermore, even when one is acquainted with the issues in question, K's persuasive writing ability can cause questions to arise.

For instance, from early on, it was troubling that K. apparently did not consider any option other than Markan priority. For him, the issue of Synoptic succession was a closed discussion without so much as a debate. Such an assumption, while beneficial to his argument, appears to be unwise.

Second, K. appears to have a predisposition toward sources pre-dating the canonical gospels. This is most evident in his discussion regarding Thomas, the Q document and the Gospel of Mark with the so-called UrMarkus.

Also somewhat disappointing is the treatment of *Epistula Apostolorum*. In the preface (and apparently in the pre-publication publicity), K states that he will treat this document with the assumption that he will treat it in similar fashion to the rest of his volume. However, in comparison with his remarks on other issues, his treatment of the *Epistula* is at best an after-thought (47).

Various hypotheses are detected throughout the book, each time with a critical role in the argument presented by K. This greatly hindered the book since many of those logical jumps were wider than this reader cared to go.

Perhaps the most unsatisfactory element in this book has been alluded to throughout, but not stated. For K, the role of non-canonical and extra-canonical books is as readily possible and acceptable in canonical development, a conclusion which can blur the lines between accepted, canonical works and the rejected spurious works. This troubling aspect makes this a difficult volume for the conservative scholar.

In conclusion, this book provides a fountainhead of information for both the student and the scholar. It has introductory remarks regarding the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter, but he also includes enough substance for the scholar to find this writing of value. While many of the conclusions are questionable, the research and breadth of investigation are not. No doubt, this book will be in use by both groups for years to come.

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