Koester makes clear in his Preface what he proposes. He undertakes to write neither an introduction to the NT nor a history of Christian literature but a history of early Christian churches, which is the context within which the literature is to be understood. Reconstruction of this history requires the examination of all Christian writings from the first 150 years of Christian history; hence he will also treat sixty non-canonical writings. Convinced that new discoveries, particularly the Nag Hammadi writings, require a reorientation of our views, Koester wishes to advance scholarship, recognizing that hypothetical reconstruction will play a part in his attempt. He also signals his perception of that history. It was a “complex process, full of controversies and difficult decisions. Understanding this process requires critical judgment as well as the construction of trajectories through the history of early Christianity.”

Koester is further convinced that the investigation must take place in the context of the history of religions. Thus, his work is to be seen as in the tradition of his teacher Rudolf Bultmann, to whose memory it is dedicated. Elsewhere, he had decried the use of the history of religions to provide “backgrounds” to the NT. He noted the inherent tendencies in the history of religions approach which contributed to a certain disregard for questions of historical dating and distinctions in historical development. A convenient, albeit unjustified, consequence has been to describe these backgrounds as something strangely inflexible that did not change its basic contours over the centuries.

---


This description, which James M. Robinson has also criticized for being static and monolithic, only rarely allowed the religion of Judaism and Hellenism to be integrated into the picture of a developing and changing Christianity. Earlier, in stressing the need for more precise description of Hellenistic Judaism, Koester had indicated what he had in mind. The essential desideratum, he thought, was “the interpretation of the religious self-understanding in the particular historical setting, rather than the clever arrangement of history of religions parallels in a non-historical fashion.”

Hence the two volumes before us.

The task of writing a history of early Christianity and its literature which does justice to Christianity’s participation in the world in which it existed is a daunting one. Under the best of circumstances, it is difficult not to allow our perception of one to influence our description of the other. That the effort must nevertheless be made goes without question, but the difficulty of the undertaking is the more obvious when it is attempted in one book, even though it be as learned and brilliant as Koester’s. The final test, in addition to the degree to which the integrity of one’s material is safeguarded, must be the extent to which the description of Christianity is really informed by what precedes it. It is to these issues that I shall address myself.

**Volume 1: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age**

The first part is as good a one-volume treatment of the history and culture of the Hellenistic and Roman periods as can be found, and will become a standard reference work for students of early Christianity. Although he of necessity at times depends heavily on the work of others, Koester nevertheless provides a viewpoint that makes for a coherent picture. In addition to the topics usually taken up in such books (history, society, economics, education, language, literature, philosophy, and religion), he devotes one-fourth of his space to Judaism in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, including consideration of its literature. There is so much here that interests the student of the NT that one wishes that more references to the second volume had been provided.

---