J.K. Elliott


James Keith Elliott, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Textual Criticism at the University of Leeds, is an outstanding scholar who has worked throughout his professional career in the areas of textual criticism and the apocryphal writings of the New Testament. He is well known for his 1993 (and republished in 2005) revision with a new translation of the collection of apocryphal texts that was originally published in 1924: _The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M. R. James_. Oxford: Clarendon Press. In this second edition of his significant and well received _Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives_, Elliott has expanded and developed this _Synopsis_ in a remarkable way.

In providing this review I shall draw attention first to the new texts and additions that Elliott has introduced into the first edition before reviewing this volume as a whole. I proceed this way in order to demonstrate first of all for those who are already familiar with the first edition the extent to which this edition has been significantly developed. Secondly, I wish to demonstrate, especially for those unfamiliar with the previous work, the truly significant and comprehensive study that Elliott has made of these early apocryphal Christian writings.

This second edition has been substantially revised and expanded in length by at least seventy-five pages. In his preface, Elliott outlines the texts that he has incorporated into this new volume. Some of these texts have only become available since the publication of the first edition of this _Synopsis_: these include _The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy_, an Ethiopic version of _The Infancy Gospel of Thomas_ and two Sahidic Coptic extracts. Also included are two accounts of the Wise Men: _The Revelation of the Magi_ and _The Legend of Aphroditianus_. In addition to these new texts, Elliott has obtained permission (not available to the first edition) to include _extracts from the Liber Flavus_. These additional texts greatly enhance the original _Synopsis_. As a consequence of these additions Elliott has revised his _Introduction_ substantially as well as the _Bibliography_ and has included a final chapter, entitled _Concluding Notes_. These are undoubtedly substantial additions that greatly enhance the first edition.

Elliott opens his study with a significantly revised _Introduction_ (p. 1-12) in which he sets out clearly how he will proceed, the texts he will use and the purpose of this study. At the outside he explains the way in which he has organized this _Synopsis_. Usually the term _Synopsis_ is associated with the production of a
work that places similar texts beside each other in parallel columns so that similarities and differences among the various texts could be seen immediately on the one page. Elliott, however, organized this Synopsis around a common topic or category with separate subheadings where narrative passages from different traditions and texts follow each other sequentially. While this is perhaps not the best visual way for viewing the similarities and differences, it is practical since Elliott is operating with eighteen different texts. Such a number of texts cannot possibly be placed in parallel vertical columns. I must admit that I have found this method to be both practical and also most helpful in gaining insight into the similarities and differences but also in gaining a clear overview of the whole narrative. Without doubt it enables the reader to see both the forest and the trees simultaneously.

In addition to the canonical accounts of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2, Elliott includes in his Synopsis eighteen texts that comprise the following: (1) The Protevangelium of James; (2) The Infancy Gospel of Thomas; (3) The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew; (4) Arundel 404 (together with the Hereford Cathedral Latin infancy narrative that is now renamed the 'J' Compilation); (5) De Nativitate Mariae; (6) The History of Joseph the Carpenter; (7) Papyrus Cairensis 10735; (8) Two fragmentary Sahidic Coptic texts; (9) The Discourse of Demetrius; (10) On the Priesthood of Jesus; (11) The Arabic Infancy Gospel; (12) The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy; (13) The Irish Versified Narrative of Infancy Thomas; (14) Leabhar Breac; (15) Liber Flavus Fergusianum; (16) The Revelation of the Magi; (17) The Legend of Aphroditianus; and (18) An Ethiopic version of Infancy Thomas (p. 3).

Elliott acknowledges that the parameters that he has chosen in producing this Synopsis of the narrative texts are those “set by Geerard’s chapter ‘Apocrypha de Nativitate et de Infantia’” (p. 3). (See M. Geerard, Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti [Turnhout, 1992] 25-42). Elliott divided the material into ten sections (or chapters) that he identifies as the main episodes in the narratives. Each of these sections is further divided into subsections that draw attention to specific elements in the narration of the episode. The ten sections that he finds as the fundamental structure of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives are the following: (1) Mary’s Birth and Upbringing; (2) the Annunciation; (3) Mary Visits Elizabeth; (4) Mary’s Pregnancy and Its Explanation (including the Explanation to Joseph and The Questioning of Joseph and Mary by the Priests); (5) the Birth of Jesus; (6) the Adoration of Jesus after his Birth; (7) the Presentation in the Temple; (8) the Magi; (9) the Slaying of the Infants and the Flight to Egypt; (10) Jesus as a Child.

The main body of this work comprises these ten sections arranged into ten chapters that make up the Synopsis itself (p. 13-219). Each chapter follows the