

## BOOK REVIEWS

Achtemeier, Paul J., Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. xii + 624 pp. Hardcover, \$35.00.

*Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* is an apt title for this volume, which approaches the NT from a strong literary viewpoint. Rather than seeking to expose the earliest sources and forms of NT books and piece together the successive strata of each book's composition, the authors use a literary approach to investigate the meaning conveyed in the final form of the text and to explore how this meaning was communicated. In addition, the authors make thoughtful use of historical and social science methodologies to assist the reader in understanding the sociocultural assumptions shared by the NT author and his audience.

Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson have produced a text which, though imposing in size, provides a more reader-friendly approach than the traditional scholarly NT introduction. The book jacket states that the book is directed toward Bible students and "those approaching the Christian Scriptures for the first time," and it does indeed sketch the outlines of NT life and literature with a breadth helpful to the first-time student. However, the additional wealth of pertinent information about interpretation, history, and culture also makes the volume valuable to the more knowledgeable Bible student in college and seminary, as well as church study groups. Unlike many NT introductions that read more like reference books, the style is engaging and readable. The font is attractive, and the organization and layout—with judicious use of sidebars, charts, maps, and pictures—seem to guide the reader through the experiences of NT authors.

The book opens with a chapter introducing the NT from three different angles—literary, historical, and scriptural. It then moves to an excellent overview of the world of the NT, beginning with the pervasive influence of Hellenism and the experience of Roman domination, followed by an examination of some of its central cultural institutions, including kinship and family, reciprocity, patronage, and status and power relationships. In dealing with each NT book, the authors avoid the formulaic outline of author-date-audience-purpose, instead allowing the concerns of the biblical author, as displayed in the text, to guide the topics discussed.

Each book is treated in canonical order, with additional chapters introducing major themes and genres. The discussion of the four Gospels is preceded by a chapter on their nature and is concluded by a portrait of Jesus gathered from the Gospels and history (209). In addition, two chapters devoted to the NT epistles and to the life of Paul precede the presentation of his letter to the Romans. The volume closes with a brief overview of the formation of the NT canon.

One aspect of the book that makes it particularly readable is the avoidance of any scholarly argument the authors do not consider essential for helping the student to grasp the meaning of the text. In some cases, this means presenting only the viewpoint that the authors find most compelling. In others, issues they judge to be side points are ignored altogether. While this has resulted in a text that might

be described as an "introduction to the NT" rather than an "introduction to scholarly debates about the NT," the uninitiated reader may be left overconfident about the certainty of some of the statements made and unaware of many issues faced by NT scholars. Those who choose to use this book as a text must make the choice, as the authors have apparently done, to seek primarily to arouse a growing interest in the messages conveyed by the canonical texts and how they were shaped by the world in which they arose, rather than to view it as a source for informing readers of the current state of various historical debates.

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TERESA REEVE

Barrett, David B., George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2d ed., 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, Vol. 1: xii+876 pp., Vol. 2: vi+823 pp. Hardcover, \$295.00.

In an attempt to answer the question, "What is the status of Christianity worldwide?" nothing even comes close to the extensive response provided by this massive work. Volume 1 looks at the world by countries and is geographically oriented. About 90 percent of the book consists of a country-by-country survey of the world's 238 geopolitical units. Each country survey includes general survey data, charts of religious adherents and organized churches/denominations, an exposition of the religious situation in the country with an emphasis on Christian activity, suggested future trends, and a bibliography. The volume also includes an introduction to the status of Christianity and religions in the modern world, concluding with an atlas that provides a visual explication of the data discussed in the book.

Volume 2 is people-oriented. It views the world in segments—religions, peoples, languages, cities and civil divisions. The last 180 pages consist of references: a dictionary of Christianity, a world bibliography, a directory of religions and ministries, and indices.

Everything about this encyclopedia is impressively large, from comprehensive world coverage to page size (10" x 12½"). It spans 167 statistical indicators for all 238 countries and incorporates ten million annual reports that form the raw material for this work. No wonder another large volume has been published to interpret the data contained in this set! The editors specifically state that this work is "empirical" (1: 1, vi) and that analysis and interpretation of the data is a separate task (1:1, vii). We will be pursuing that challenging task for a long time to come.

The work is also large-hearted and inclusive. Groups that many would not classify as part of the Christian family are given space—from ancient heretics such as Nestorians and Monophysites to modern Unitarians, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. So are African independent churches. No country is too small (Pitcairn Island with a population of forty-seven) nor any language/dialect too insignificant to study.

This set represents a major updating and expansion of the one-volume first edition of this work (1982). The new edition has more than 700 pages and has been reorganized. The biggest change comes in the ethnolinguistic area. The original work had eleven pages on ethnolinguistics, while the second edition has 230 pages on the