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book review: Craig R. Koester. Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible 36. New York: Doubleday, 2001. Pp. xxiii + 604. ISBN 0385468938. US \$47.50.

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Craig R. Koester. *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 36. New York: Doubleday, 2001. Pp. xxiii + 604. ISBN 0385468938. US \$47.50.

1. The book of Hebrews is often called one of the great riddles of the New Testament, for many of the main questions connected with it are unanswered, or the answers given remain controversial. Therefore, every good commentary is a welcome step forward towards a better understanding of this strange text. In my review of C. R. Koester's voluminous new commentary (604 pp.) in the Anchor Bible series, I concentrate on the introduction and, in accordance with the interests of *TC* readers, on the treatment of several text-critical issues.

2. After an English translation of the text, Koester starts his introduction with a broad overview of the history of interpretation and influence of Hebrews. He sees three major shifts in the study of Hebrews: (1) Until the end of antiquity the canonicity of Hebrews was questioned, particularly in the Western churches. (2) During the sixteenth century the issue of the status of Hebrews was reopened in disputes between Catholics and Protestants. (3) Finally, the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century led to some new, still unresolved problems like these: Who was the author and who were the addressees of the book? How can the social context of its composition be described? What is its place in early Christianity and within a history of religions?

3. At this point Koester discusses the main scholarly proposals concerning introductory questions about the book. He shows that a simplified conclusion about a Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian readership of Hebrews does not fit the background of early Christianity, where in a significant number of people (e.g., Timothy) both backgrounds were interwoven in a complex manner. Koester then goes on to discuss Jerusalem and Rome as possible destinations of the text--"with Rome currently deemed as most plausible" (48)--and shows that Hebrews cannot be dated more specifically than "between A.D. 60 and 90" (54). Comparing the ideas of Hebrews to other Christian texts of the first century, the author shows that its theology is not an isolated phenomenon in early Christian thought. Rather, Hebrews has affinities with Pauline texts and 1 Peter, and it presupposes knowledge of several familiar Christian teachings such as baptism, resurrection, and judgment.

4. After a short discussion of scholarly research on the place of Hebrews in a history of religions, Koester develops his own idea of the social setting out of which this text emerged. He reconstructs a history of the community addressed by Hebrews in three phases:

First, the community was formed when Christian evangelists proclaimed a message of salvation, performing miracles to validate their preaching. Some persons came to faith, experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit and a sense of enlightenment; they received baptism and the laying on of hands. Second, non-Christians instigated hostilities against the community by physically accosting Christians and denouncing them before local authorities, who imprisoned them and allowed Christian property to be plundered. During the conflict, Christians maintained their faith commitments and supported each other, attending to the needs of those in prison. Third, overt persecution gave way to a lower level of conflict in which non-Christians continued to verbally harass Christians. Some from the community were in prison, and others felt the effects of being marginalized in society. Although some

continued to show faith and compassion, others experienced a malaise that was evident in tendencies to neglect the faith and community gatherings [64-65; see also 65-73].

5. As alluded to earlier, the Christian community addressed by Hebrews is defined through its connections with the Jewish subculture and the dominant Greco-Roman culture. An impressive, but I think highly hypothetical, picture emerges that forms the background for Koester's later interpretation of the text. In my opinion, reconstructions like this are interesting--and this one is quite plausible--but such an approach is also in danger of creating a vicious circle: a text is interpreted on the basis of a reconstruction that has as its only fundament the text itself. Furthermore, one could ask whether the initial situation in which a text originated ought to be decisive for its understanding; for example, in the case of canonical texts the Bible forms a new background against which this text could and should be read and understood.

6. After this proposal, Koester discusses the formal and rhetorical aspects of the text. Regarding the difficult question of the genre of Hebrews, he points to elements common to letters and speeches, but he ultimately decides that Hebrews should be described in terms of a speech. Whether this speech should be called deliberative or epideictic depends on its readers:

For listeners, who remain committed to God and Christ, Hebrews is epideictic, since it maintains the values they already hold. For those tending to drift away from the faith, Hebrews is deliberative, since it seeks to dissuade them from apostasy and move them toward a clearer faith commitment [82].

7. Approaching Hebrews from the point of view of ancient rhetoric, Koester divides the text into five parts (*exordium* [1:1-2:4]; a short *proposition* [2:5-9], three series of *arguments* [2:10-12:27], *peroration* [12:28-13:21], and an epistolary *postscript* [13:22-25]) and gives a detailed discussion of the text's rhetorical strategy, its language, and its style.

8. Chapter IV is devoted to selected issues in the theology of Hebrews. Koester thoroughly discusses questions of cosmology, eschatology, Christology, the role of promises and the law, the relation between old and new covenant, etc. All in all, his introduction is an extremely valuable source for everyone working on Hebrews.

9. There is also a short chapter on the text of Hebrews. Here the author gives a list of extant papyri--he is not aware of the newly published fragments P.Oxy. 4498 (P¹¹⁴, 3rd century, Heb 1:7-12) and P.Vindob. G 42417 (P¹¹⁶, 6th century, Heb 2:9-11; 3:3-6)--and uncials with portions of the text of Hebrews. In addition, he points to some important minuscules and early versions. After a 33-page bibliography covering nineteen centuries of research on Hebrews, Koester starts his commentary, a treasury for almost every problem connected with Hebrews. Here also a number of textual variants are discussed in the "Notes," which are always followed by a commentary on each section.

10. My impression is that the author devotes a good deal of time and interest to very careful analyses of textual problems in Hebrews. For example, he devotes a full page (217-218) to the question of whether Hebrews 2:9 reads $\chi\alpha/\rho\iota\tau\iota\ \eta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota$ or $\chi\omega\rho\iota\ \eta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota$. He lists the external evidence (including early Christian authors) supporting the variants, discusses which reading is stylistically more consistent with the rest of Hebrews, and points to the theological impact of both variants. Finally, he decides in favor of the first reading (also to be found in the

United Bible Society's *Greek New Testament*). The detailed analysis of this textual problem is only one example of more than a hundred cases where Koester discusses the textual evidence of Hebrews (e.g., 4:2 on p. 270; 8:8 on p. 385; 11:11 on p. 487; 11:37 on p. 515). Of course, the text-critical issue is not Koester's main interest, and so it would not be fair to judge this splendid volume from this perspective alone.

11. Koester has provided scholars with a commentary that will stand as a landmark in research on Hebrews. Although some of his reconstructions of its social background seem to me disputable, his detailed analyses of the book of Hebrews, one of the most difficult texts of early Christianity, are a source from which future scholars will draw for years to come.

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