

BOOK REVIEWS

The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years. Opening Volume: The Veil is Torn: A.D. 30 to 70. Pentecost to the Destruction of Jerusalem. T. Byfield (Ed.). 2002, Edmonton, AB: Christian History Project, 286 pages.

This coffee-table size book is a magnificent undertaking aimed at familiarizing lay readers with the religious foundations of North America. The project was spearheaded by a group of journalists and completed by 26 individuals, most of whom have other than academic theological qualifications. Perhaps this tack was taken because it was thought that professional biblical commentators and theologians are insufficiently clear when explaining the Christian faith.

Apparently two academics, Dr. William S. Barker, of Westminster Theological Seminary, and Dr. Dennis Martin, of Loyola University, representing both Evangelical and Orthodox persuasions, “supervised the project” (p. 278). Basically written by journalists, however, the book lacks professional rigour, and attempts to make up for this shortcoming by including very beautiful photographs and pictures, maps, and illustrations, and an enriched number of sidebar stories. The latter are unfortunately printed on dark brown parchment-coloured paper which makes the text difficult to see.

This publication is the first of three intended volumes, each covering a specific period of Christian history: A.D. 30 to 70 A.D. (Pentecost to the destruction of Jerusalem), A.D. 70 to 250 A.D. (persecution of early Christians), and A.D. 250 to 337 (reign of Constantine to the creation of the first Christian kingdoms in Armenia and Georgia). This first effort is described as the “Opening Volume” and elaborates a series of crucial first century topics such as the continuing debate about Jesus’ identity, the role of the Apostle Peter, and Saul’s brutal campaign to annihilate Christians as well as his subsequent conversion to “Paul,” as an active missionary. The three final topics pertain to the validity and date of the Gospels, the life and times of the Nero, the Roman Emperor, and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Analyzing the text of the book is somewhat problematic since it is not always clear what kinds of sources are being utilized. Although

biblical texts are often quoted (they appear in quotation marks), they are seldom referenced. A random look at chapters two and three confirms this. For example, in chapter two, there are at least 14 scriptural quotations, but only three references are given (on pages 42, 55, and 63). In chapter three there are several biblical quotations but only one is referenced (on page 75). On page 72 it is reported that "legend has it" but no source is cited. Page 229 reveals the same tack when it is stated that, "The fates of the others [disciples] is solely in legend and pious tradition." Are we to infer from this that lay readers to whom this book is directed will be sufficiently aware of legendary sources to be comforted by the allusion? On page 108 the reader is informed that "there is also speculation that Paul had contacted malaria ... in Asia Minor" but there is no indication as to whose speculation this is. Undoubtedly this cavalier approach to documentation will make biblical scholars squirm and may be the reason why they were not asked to contribute to the series.

On the positive side of the ledger, it can safely be said that there is a crying need for this type of publication. Byfield is correct when he observes that North Americans have been amputated from their Christian origins and are embracing wild doctrines based on sheer nonsense" (p. vii). The nature and identity of many national holidays and celebrations previously based on Canadian and American Christian origins have been secularized to the point that ignorance of national philosophical origins is virtually guaranteed. Public schools have not helped. Logically, although conversion to Christianity is not a contemporary perceived objective of national school systems, surely acquaintance with the historical past must be. Why shortchange students of their right to know simply because secularism is the current philosophy of the day? Usually only despotic systems justify the squelching of truth.

This book is clearly a treatise in apologetics, but its objective is not couched in such language. Instead, Christian history is laid out in quite ordinary prose but with subtle arguments that support the Christian claims. A section in the seventh chapter, which discusses Bishop John Robinson's book, *Honest to God*, is a case in point. Part of the discussion of the Synoptic Problem, Robinson's claims that the Gospels were written much earlier than usually accepted, tend to validate a conservative interpretation of the Bible. If the Gospels *were* written earlier than 19th century theologians dated them, it would explain why

there was no mention of the Fall of Jerusalem by Titus in any biblical writings.

When Robinson made his claims he naturally set the theological world on end. This was not the usual way to date Scripture. How dare the bishop depart from "established truth?" Robinson countered in words implying that an unquestioned faith is a stagnant faith. He claimed that biblical scholars tend to follow preceding interpretations. In his words, "Each student enters a field already marked out for him by datelines which modesty as well as sloth prompts him to accept, and having accepted, to preserve" (p. 210).

There is some doubt that this volume will reach the audience for whom it is intended. The intriguingly labelled sidebars will undoubtedly serve as a magnet, but the hefty price of \$55.95 per volume could be a hindrance to sales. Consider these sidebar titles: "Who's to blame [for Jesus' death]? The Jews or the Romans" (pp. 26-27), "Why Peter; He was undependable, and cowardly, and he lied. Why not John?" (p. 61), "A 'good' Samaritan? Why, that just couldn't be" (pp. 78-79), "Cities without street names, streets without addresses" (p. 157), and "What ever happened to the rest of the twelve disciples?" (pp. 229-230).

Biblical academicians will likely analyse this book and find aspects of it wanting, but then they will almost certainly *have* to take that approach on professional grounds. This book was clearly not intended to be a scholarly work. Readers with a thirst to acquire knowledge about this continent's Christian roots, on the other hand, should appreciate the easy-reading style of the prose and be lured by the book's breath-taking illustrations. This book offers a very conscientious and tasteful way by which religious historical knowledge (specifically Christian), can be obtained.

Copies of the entire series should be placed in every public library in the country.

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