
This is a reprint of the Rockwell Lectures first given at Rice University in 1975, with some additions intended to bring the work up to date in the light of the considerable developments in the field of the sociological study of the New Testament and early Christianity.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Prolegomena', is a survey of the work of the principal scholars whose interest has been in Christianity as a social phenomenon, from Lohmeyer in the 1920's, through the work of the Chicago School in the period between the world wars, to the emergence of the younger scholars who in the last decade or so have developed this aspect of study to a significant extent.

Malherbe does not make exclusive claims for this field of study, but sees the sociological approach 'as one method among others that we may utilise'. He states that the perception of the nature of the early Christian communities 'will help us to understand both early Christianity and its literature better. . . . .' (p.11). 'We must persist in seeking to determine the character and intention of different types of literature if we hope to discern how they functioned in relation to the communities with which they were associated. When this is done they can more properly be assessed as witnesses to particular communities.' (p.15)

The importance of style and genre is discussed in relation to 1 Thessalonians. Malherbe describes the last two chapters as clearly paraenetic; the first three chapters are more difficult and reflect the style of the Philosophers of the first century A.D., and especially the antithetic style by which the Philosophers introduced themselves to their audience. Thus Paul is not denying charges, as some scholars have suggested, but rather, through self-description, he lays the foundation for the exhortations of chapters 4 and 5, and incidentally gives us an insight into the nature of the Thessalonian community and his own relationship to it. This leads to a useful exposition of 1 Thessalonians against the sociological background of the letter.

The chapter, then, gives a summary of the research which uses this sociological approach to the present time, and illustrates in respect of 1 Thessalonians some of the insights which can be gained by such an approach to the New Testament.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Social Level and Literary Culture'. Here we have an instructive discussion of the language of the New Testament and the social level of early Christians. The conclusion reached is that the New Testament writers reflect the language of the Septuagint much more than that of the Papyri, and Malherbe supports the view of Nigel Turner that New Testament Greek represents a special dialect (p.36). The question of
Paul’s education is discussed, together with that of the social status of early Christians. Here the work of E. A. Judge is given prominence in the discussion. There is also an interesting section on the Haustafeln — the lists of household duties which form the basis of wider social responsibilities; and this aspect is discussed especially in relation to 1 Peter 2.12ff.

Chapter 3 deals with ‘House Churches and Their Problems’. ‘Early Christianity shared in the mobility of its society’, and the letter to the Romans, and especially chapter 16, illustrates this fact. Malherbe discusses the dangers — both physical and moral — of ancient travel, and the need for Christian hospitality. The house church was one particular expression of this hospitality; it also provided a place of nurture for converts. ‘The individual house churches would have represented the Church in any one area.’ (p.70).

This leads to a long and instructive discussion of the work of Gerd Thiessen in relation especially to the Corinthian Church, and some interesting conclusions are reached in regard to the social status and wealth of the Corinthian Christians.

Chapter 4 is entitled ‘Hospitality and Inhospitality in the Church’. This is a reprint, substantially unchanged, of an article originally published elsewhere under the title ‘The Inhospitality of Diotrophes’. It is a discussion of 3 John, and Malherbe states that he will treat it in the same way in which he treated 1 Thessalonians in chapter 1, ‘paying close attention to the social practices reflected in the letter and to the literary genre and function of the document’. While the article has its own interest, it is unfortunate that no real attempt has been made to integrate the material with the rest of the book, and this chapter does not fit happily here, and adds little to what has been said in other places.

The book concludes with an Epilogue which seeks to correct errors in the earlier edition, and to bring the references to various aspects of the sociological field up to date with the latest publications. The Epilogue ends with a rather petulant defence against some comments of an earlier reviewer which might have been better ignored.

This book provides an up to date and useful guide to sociological studies in regard to the New Testament and the early Church. To this extent it is a helpful introduction to this field of study. However the footnotes are very full and will enable those who want to go further to follow up the many different themes which emerge. Unfortunately in the end of the reader is left with a feeling of dissatisfaction that the whole is not better integrated. Malherbe states in his introduction that his energies have been directed elsewhere since the lectures were first published, and this may account for the unsatisfactory features of this revision. Nevertheless the book is worth
study and is a useful reference tool for those who wish to pursue this par-
ticular field of study.

Calum Gilmour

Religious Conflict in Fourth Century Rome, a documentary study by Brian Croke and Jill Harries (Sydney University Press), first published in 1982, 155 pages.

The purpose of this attractively produced source-book is to collect together ‘in annotated translation much of the material relevant, both directly and as background, to the debate between pagan and Christian aristocrats in the city of Rome in the late fourth century’. Two major incidents in the late fourth century are seen as encapsulating this conflict — the petition to restore the Altar of Victory to the Senate House in 384, and the public revival of pagan ceremonies during the reign of the usurper Eugenius in 394. These incidents are illustrated from documents emanating from both sides of the argument, and they serve to highlight the main points of contention on both sides.

After listing the abbreviations used in the text, the authors provide two clear and helpful Tables. The first sets out the dates of the Emperors of both the Eastern and Western Empires, together with events significant for the religious controversy, from 300 A.D. to the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410. The second Table illustrates the relationships with the house of Valentinian and Theodosius.

The Prologue sets the city of Rome in the context of the fourth century as a pagan and Christian stronghold, and documents are chosen to illustrate how both Christian and pagan felt about the eternal city itself. This leads to chapter 1 and a consideration of how Christianity found acceptance within the state after the Edict of Toleration in 311, and Constantine’s victory over Maxentius in 313. With the Edict of Milan and Constantine’s conversion, Christianity becomes an object of Imperial favour and patronage. Here, and throughout the book, each text is introduced succinctly and placed in its context; difficulties are explained and further reading suggested in footnotes. The progress of the acceptance of Christianity is illustrated throughout the fourth century with well-chosen quotes from a wide variety of documents.

Chapter 2 deals specifically with the debate on the Altar of Victory. We are given a summary of the history of the Altar and its accompanying statue, and of the course of the debate surrounding its various removals and restorations. The Bishop Ambrose of Milan and the Prefect Symmachus