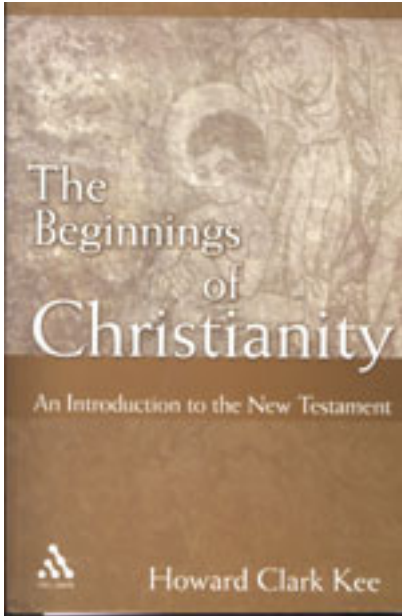


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Kee, Howard Clark

The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament

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This book represents a rich amalgamation of the type of data often covered in an introductory course on the New Testament. In the book's introduction (1–8), however, Kee describes his project, not as an introduction to the New Testament (cf. book's subtitle), but as a "history of Christian origins" (1). In contrast to other new introductory texts (e.g., Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005]), Kee pays little attention to methodology. His energies are directed, rather, to historical background and exegesis in the form of paraphrase (with references in parentheses). Examination of the former commences in the introduction with a few comments on the concept of historicity (2), followed by a short discussion of the impact of Babylonian and "Iranian" (5) culture on postexilic Judaism.

Chapter 1 builds on this description of the impact of Babylonian and Iranian culture with a longer treatment of the impact of Greco-Roman culture on the Judaism of nascent Christianity (11–61). The author includes two paragraphs on mysticism, citing Ithamar Gruenwald's description of *merkabah* theophanies, although precise bibliographical details are missing (cf. 165 n. 233). Curiously, in this chapter's subsection entitled "Jewish Hopes and Agents for Liberation and/or for Renewal of the Covenant," after "Messiah"

and “Son of David” (29–30) and before “Son of Man” (34–35), Kee inserts the “impact of Hellenistic philosophy” (30), taking up Jewish wisdom texts such as Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon, Aristobulus, and 4 Maccabees.

Chapters 2, “The Jesus Tradition and the Formation of the New Covenant Community,” and 3, “Paul and the Apostolic Traditions,” constitute Kee’s exegetical analysis of the New Testament. The explicit focus in chapter 2 is on Jesus as teacher, a role that is, according to Kee, “often ... eclipsed by the major concentration of theologians on the significance of his death, burial, and resurrection—which Paul identifies as ‘the gospel’” (65). Chapter 2 opens with Kee’s examination of non-Christian sources (e.g., Pliny, Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinic sources), followed by a short theoretical discussion highlighting positions of F. C. Baur, R. Bultmann, and Martin Kähler (72–78). Kee next treats the meaning of the term *euangelion*, arguing (with K. L. Schmidt and others) that, in terms of its literary genre, the Gospel of Mark (“the first gospel” [82; see also 99–100] dated to 65 C.E. [83]) had “no real precedent” (82; see also 119; “unique,” 120). Kee perceives Q as earlier than Mark, revealing not “timeless truths” (so J. Kloppenborg) but “radical calls to obedience” (so R. A. Piper, B. Witherington [83–84]). Also with respect to Q, the topic of Hellenistic wisdom is again broached, this time in an argument for its misperception. According to Kee, this false impression is “a consequence of the hypothesis that differentiates sharply between apocalyptic ... and what are assumed to be the perspective of the popular philosophies of the Graeco-Roman period: Cynicism and Stoicism” (84; cf. excursus 3).

According to Kee, orally transmitted traditions in the form of sayings (e.g., aphorisms, parables, sayings clusters) and narratives (e.g., anecdotes, wonder stories, legends; 100–101) are important distinguishable features of Mark’s narrative. On Mark’s use of the Jewish scriptures, Kee views as “condescending” (103) the hypothesis that such early Christian appeals (beginning with, but not limited to Mark 1:2) were intended to authenticate the early church movement as a development of foundational Judaism (102–3). Rather, he argues that the “Qumran Essenes” and the early church viewed the scriptures as “blueprints for the future that God had in store for his creation in general, and for his people in particular” (103). How these two hermeneutical strategies are mutually incompatible, however, is not specified. Suffering and death play almost no part in Kee’s interpretation of Jesus in Mark.

In Matthew, Jesus is successor to Moses (121–23; see also 136). According to Kee, Matthew’s Gospel is structured around the repeated phrase “when Jesus had finished” in 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1 (121)—a scheme that in turn structures Kee’s chapter. Although authorship, date, and provenance do not arise in Kee’s treatment of Matthew, he does mention authorship at the end of his chapter on Mark (119–20) and begins his

section on Luke with a discussion of Lukan authorship (136–37). Kee presents Lucian’s highly ironic *On How to Write History* as “an important model” for understanding Lukan method (138; à la W. C. van Unnik) and takes a mission to Gentiles and Jews as a “major feature” of Luke (139). He refers to the so-called “travel narrative” as “a special section” (147), separating it into three parts: 9:51–13:21; 13:22–17:10; 13[sic]:11–19:27 (140). (References to Jerusalem at 18:31; 19:11; and 19:28 are absent.) With respect to Luke 10:1–16, Kee notes: “Seventy was the traditional Jewish number for the nations of the world, as reflected in the designation of the Koiné Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible as the Septuagint: ‘the seventy’” (147). This comment would, perhaps, have been more suitable in the section on the Septuagint (17).

Outlining the Fourth Gospel in three sections—1:19–13:38; 14:1–17:26; and 18:1–20:31 (+ epilogue: 21:1–31), Kee states that this text—of “probable date” in the second century (164)—reflects a “community of mystical participation” (163). Kee defines “mysticism” here in terms of Greek mystery initiation, Platonic philosophy, Jewish wisdom, and the *merkabah* tradition (163–66). Unfortunately two expert citations on Jewish wisdom in this section (165) lack bibliographical detail. The chapter closes with brief attention to apocryphal Gospels, including “Fragments of Unknown Gospels” “Gnostic Gospels,” “Jewish-Christian Gospels,” “Infancy Gospels,” and “Other Gospels.” The conclusion for this chapter is provided by the comment that Tatian’s *Diatessaron* set the precedent for unifying diverse Gospel traditions (196), an observation that fails to take into account early church resistance to harmonization.

Chapter 3 opens with a discussion of sources concerning Paul. An introduction to the book of Acts (216–18) sets up Paul’s biographical depiction. A. Deissmann’s outdated distinction between letter and epistle (234) and conventions of epistolography set up Kee’s discussion of the letters themselves. Outlining his strategy, Kee states, “Our analytical procedure is to offer an examination of each of the letters—first those very likely written by Paul, and then of those written in his name” (234–35). The letters of the first group valued by Kee as “authentic” are listed twice as Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (“widely regarded as authentic” [215]), and Philemon (214 and 215). However, in Kee’s text-by-text examination, the Corinthian correspondence is missing. Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* (treated on 274 yet absent from the list on 257), the *Correspondence between Seneca and Paul*, the *Pseudo-Titus Epistle*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Apocalypse of Paul* (in the list on 257 but absent from discussion) are dealt with in a subsequent section entitled “Paul as Portrayed in Letters Attributed to Him” (256–79). The chapter concludes with brief treatments of 1 Peter, Jude, 2 Peter, James (317–23), and Hebrews (323–29), which, for Kee, also betrays close association with the Jewish wisdom tradition (323).

In chapter 4, on “non-canonical traditions,” Kee provides limited background on the collection known as the “apostolic fathers,” in addition to a few important patristic texts, including a section repeating the earlier one on the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* (cf. 274 and 358). More than twice the length of chapter 4, chapter 5 provides Kee’s construction of the sociohistorical development of early church hierarchy. The book concludes with seven extensive excurses on a wide range of topics.

On almost any reading, this book appears to have been hastily compiled. Oversights and inaccuracies, a few of which are noted here, occur with remarkable frequency. Bulks of material dedicated in excurses and elsewhere to special topics occupy the space of essentials. In the end, omission of the Corinthian correspondence is probably more symptom than disease—indicating a preference for a certain view of Jesus (teacher?) over a certain view of Paul (theologian?). Based on its title, the book is intended as an introductory textbook for undergraduates and seminary students. However, the author’s peculiar Jesus bias and the particular set of assumptions underlying it prompt two questions about the book’s audience: What undergraduate or seminary student can appreciate this idiosyncratic interpretation of the New Testament texts, particularly in the absence of a prolegomenon on method and purpose? Correspondingly, what professor can select an introductory textbook representing such a distinctive interpretation? Unfortunately, this volume impresses one as profit- as opposed to product-driven even as ambiguity with respect to audience undermines this goal.

The book contains no map, photograph or other image. It also includes no bibliography or list of recommended reading. Most endnotes provide the author’s additional comments and references to his own works. A subject index is included.