

BOOK REVIEW

Ben Witherington, III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001). 430 pp. Hdbk. US\$26.99.

Ben Witherington III is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is a well-known New Testament scholar and a prolific writer, who has written extensively about New Testament issues, including five commentaries, from a socio-rhetorical perspective. He brings his vast knowledge of Greco-Roman history and society to this task, including making extensive use of many of his prior works in his *New Testament History*.

Following a ‘Prolegomenon: Of History, Historians and Biographers’, in which he examines the nature of historical writing, particularly as practiced by the Greeks and early Jewish historians, Witherington explores the political and social contexts relevant to the New Testament from the birth of Alexander the Great in 356 BCE to the death of Domitian in 96 CE. He divides the period to be treated into manageable chunks relating significant historical-political developments to events depicted within the New Testament and to the documents of the New Testament themselves. His first two chapters, ‘From Alexander to Alexandria and Beyond (356–67 B.C.)’ and ‘The Rise of the Herodians, the Birth of Jesus and the Dawn of an Empire (63–4 B.C.)’, trace the Hellenization of Judea and provide background to Witherington’s primary focus. In his next four chapters, ‘The Herodians and their Prophetic Adversaries: John and Jesus (4 B.C.–A.D. 27)’, ‘The Coming of the Prefect and of the Perfect: Pilate of Rome and Jesus of Nazareth (A.D. 26–29)’, and ‘The Trials and Tribulations of Jesus (A.D. 29–30)’, Witherington places the life of Jesus and, to a lesser extent, the life of John the Baptist within the context of what was going on within the Roman Empire and Judea during that period. He then proceeds in the remaining chapters of

his book ('The Rising of the Son and the Birth of the Church (A.D. 30–33)'; 'The Roads from Jerusalem (A.D. 33–37)'; 'Dark Passages (A.D. 37–47)'; 'The Gentile Mission and the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 48–49)'; 'Good News Heading West (A.D. 50–52)'; 'The Expansion of the Enterprise (A.D. 53–57)'; 'Trials and Executions: Signs upon the Earth (A.D. 58–62)'; 'Through the Refiner's Fire (A.D. 63–68)'; 'The Dawn of the Age of Inspiration (A.D. 68–70)'; 'Beyond Jerusalem, Jamnia and the Julio-Claudians (A.D. 70–81)'; and 'The Dominion of Domitian (A.D. 81–96)') to do the same with the early church, focusing extensively on Paul's Missionary journeys and to a lesser extent upon Peter, James and the Beloved Disciple (who he does not believe is the Apostle John, but rather a Judean disciple).

The book is a well-written, easily-read narrative overview of the history it attempts to depict. Those who have read Witherington's other works will readily recognize his light but scholarly writing style. As can be seen from the chapter titles set out in the previous chapter, he has a sense of humour. Theologically, *New Testament History* is conservative, with Witherington arguing, for example, for Jesus' virgin conception, a Bethlehem birth, trials before both the Sanhedrin and Pilate, and Pauline authorship of most of the works attributed to him. Given the number of traditional conclusions which Witherington makes, it is a bit surprising to find him concluding that the 'Beloved Disciple' is not the Apostle John, but an unnamed Judean disciple and denying a Petrine authorship to 2 Peter. While the book could have used a few more maps to better situate the events recounted and while some of the photographs are of poor quality, there are a number of very useful inclusions within the book. Within every chapter Witherington includes short excursions entitled 'A Closer Look', in which he provides pertinent background discussion on relevant New Testament topics (for example, 'The Pharisees', 'Time and Calendars in Antiquity', 'Q and A on Q', and 'Paul the Roman Citizen'). Similarly, he includes a number of short excursions in shaded boxes which provide detailed background information on geographic places or socio-cultural practices (for example, 'Itinerant Doctors in Antiquity', 'Aeropagus as a Council, Not a Site' and backgrounds on first-century cities such as Athens, Ephesus, Antioch and Rome). The information within these two types of excursions is necessary to delve deeper into the points and issues that Witherington makes in his main narrative. They add a richness to the book without bogging it down into a scholarly dissertation. A second excellent feature of the book is its

charts and tables in which Witherington quickly summarizes time frames. For example, pages 171-74 contain a detailed summary of Paul's life correlating references from the Pauline epistles to references from Acts. Whether or not one agrees with Witherington's conclusions regarding the timeframe, the chart gives one a simple and useful summary of his work.

There were two features which I found disappointing in the book. The first was the manner in which Witherington has used his sources. He relies heavily upon a limited number of works, often as few as one or two principal sources for a chapter. Now to be fair to Witherington, he does explicitly acknowledge his heavy reliance upon these sources. In many cases he is relying upon his own previous work and those books themselves are densely referenced and provide useful bibliographies. In these instances, there is a sense that, while the presentation within *New Testament History* may be a restatement of material Witherington has previously presented, he has at least thought through the relevant issues. However, where he is relying almost solely upon another source (for example, as he does with J. Hayes and S. Mandell's *The Jewish People in Classical Antiquity: From Alexander to Bar Kochba* in his narrative relating to the Herodian period), this reviewer was left with uneasy questions as to how critically Witherington had assessed their material before adapting it to his book. The second disappointing feature was the lack of a bibliography, particularly in light of the detailed bibliographies Witherington presents with some of his other works. These shortcomings are not serious deficiencies in that access to more detailed sources can be had through the works which are cited, but it would have been helpful to have had access to those references directly from *New Testament History*.

*New Testament History* provides a useful introduction to the New Testament both in terms of the individuals and events depicted within the pages of the New Testament and the documents which comprise the New Testament. It gives a framework for understanding the political, social and religious contexts of the New Testament, which is necessary to interpret these Scriptures properly.

David A. Huctwith  
McMaster Divinity College