

**Miller, R J (ed) 1994 — The complete gospels: Annotated scholars version.
Revised and expanded Edition**

Sonoma: Polebridge Press. 462 pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: Dr P B Boshoff

This book presents the Biblical and non-canonical gospels as well as fragments of gospels as a unit. Hence the title: 'The complete gospels'. Each gospel is preceded by an introduction and the text itself is annotated and provided with cross references. A variety of subjects is discussed in cameo essays. In conclusion several works — mostly English-American — are suggested for further study and the book ends with a glossary. The participants in the project, namely the Jesus Seminar, can be justifiably proud of their joint effort.

The conviction of the compilers that in trying to find how Christendom came into being and for the historical study of the Jesus tradition it was necessary to look beyond the Biblical canon — hence the scope of the work. Where previous generations were indifferent to the details of the life of Jesus, through the growing consciousness of history, a need has developed for a historically accurate biography of Jesus. Jesus must be depicted as a man among men. Although 'the life of Christ' is not a theme of New Testament theology, it is historically possible and permissible to try to answer the questions regarding the historical Jesus. The theologians should not avoid the issue of questions concerning the relation between the works of the human Jesus and the Gospel.

However, to say: '(t)he distinction between the canonical and the non-canonical gospels did not exist in the period of Christian origins, and therefore is not helpful for understanding the earliest centuries of Christianity in their rich diversity' (p 4) provides a shaky foundation. The early church cannot be understood apart from the definition which it gives concerning itself. This resulted from the concept it formed of Jesus Christ and which was perpetuated in the canon. The revelation in Christ and the evidence of it, constitutes the church.

The Scholar's Version claims to be a translation free from ecclesiastical control, and that a better rendering of the texts in American English would appeal to the reader. But, as usual, getting rid of one authority, does not lead to a position of complete freedom from domination. It simply leads to the acceptance of a new authority. Being independent of ecclesiastical control does not automatically enable the scholars to make faithful translations of the texts. They place themselves at the disposal of the historical Jesus tradition. In Mark 1:40-41 for example, they wish to improve a translation such as: 'A man suffering from a dreaded skin disease came to Jesus, knelt down, and begged him for help. "If you

want to", he said, "you can make me clean". Jesus was filled with pity, and reached out and touched him. "I do want to", he answered. "Be clean"! (Good News Bible). The ill-considered Scholar's Version reads: 'Then a leper comes up to him, "If you want to, you can make me clean". Although Jesus was indignant, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and says to him, "Okay — you're clean"! The first translation describes faith. The believer entrusts himself to God and is helped. His words are repeated verbatim to confirm his faith. 'If you want to, you can make me clean'. 'I do want to. Be clean'! He whose faith endures, will stand firm. The second translation has not reflected on faith, but is an account of a remarkable incident in the course of Jesus' life on earth. The 'okay' does not confirm that the righteous live by faith. Nor is the Jesus who is proclaimed by the church indignant when sinners come to him. On the contrary he takes pity on them. The Jesus of the Scholar's Version was indignant. Hopefully, the effect of 'The complete gospels' will be to compel one to read the New Testament with renewed diligence.
