

Helmut Koester Memorial Service  
University Lutheran Church  
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At the turn of this new year we lost a tremendous scholar. Those of us to whom Helmut Koester was a teacher, colleague, and mentor—he was all three to me at Harvard—miss Helmut’s vibrant, lecturing, two-martini-with-abundant-olives presence among us. But today we also celebrate a life fully lived, a soaring career.

When news of Helmut’s death came out, many wrote in social media and blogs of their sorrow and gratitude, naming themselves not only as Helmut’s intellectual children but also as his intellectual grandchildren. Some had never met him in person, but felt his presence through their teachers who had been Helmut’s students. His work and intellectual presence moves forward, through publications and through those whom he trained, and their students. Helmut’s work goes forth into the generations.

And Helmut’s work was magisterial, his intellectual scope remarkable. It started with his dissertation, published in 1957, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern*, or “Synoptic tradition in the Apostolic Fathers.” Instead of starting with the New Testament, thinking it a firm fixed fact of the first century, Helmut showed that the second century Christian materials in the so called apostolic fathers sometimes contained *different* strains of tradition than what we hold in our hands as the synoptic gospels in the New Testament. He, faithful Christian as he was, destabilized Christian origins, showing the richness and complexity of early Christian traditions. He was even known in a class on the New Testament at Harvard to stop in the middle of lecture and show that one reading was later than another, or problematic in some way, and to ask us to cross a verse or two out as a late addition. Current and recovering evangelical students like myself

trembled in our seats, awaiting the lightening bolt. Seeing none, we made our biblical annotations and figured that God must be on Helmut Koester's side.

Helmut's astonishing breadth meant that he could bring into the study of the New Testament noncanonical texts, understanding the origins and growth of early Christianity within its full context of Roman history, and transforming the field. But he never lost a heart for the theological—something that shines through in the two 2007 volumes that he published, *From Jesus to the Gospels* and *Paul and His World* (Fortress), and that, I expect, will also emerge in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians for the Hermeneia series, which Dr. AnneMarie Luijendijk will work to finish and publish. That is, while Helmut showed how Christianity's ethics and philosophy developed in relation to its Greco-Roman context, he also emphasized the best of early Christian theology, particularly emphasizing its egalitarian nature, on the one hand, and its ethic to love on the other. Once he urgently said to me, "Laura, you understand Paul. He is about love, like the shelter in the church."

Helmut Koester's academic career did not happen in a vacuum; he was not a scholar lonely in his office. His work developed amid deep collegial friendships and he was intellectually and personally generous. Over the years Helmut and Gisela enjoyed time at Harvard and in their homes with Frank Moore Cross, Krister Stendahl, François Bovon, Gordon Kaufmann, among other colleagues, and their families. Helmut's advisees and students were brought into this collegial and intellectual family. We were treated not only to intellectual feasts in on-campus lectures, but were also welcomed into the Koester household. We were served meals that often included fruit and vegetables from the Koester's own garden, produce wrested from the groundhogs or woodchucks

that Helmut plotted against. I know this welcome was particularly extended to and appreciated by international students. They found a second home with the Koesters, a home warm with food, music, and friendship.

Helmut's generosity extended to teaching students how to hold a wineglass precisely so that it would ring musically at a toast. Aware of student budgets, he paid for his teaching fellows' dinners or lunches at Chang Sho—the one good meal of the week. My first lecture—and an honorarium—were due to him (and I know I am not the only one). And Helmut's generosity extended to space. For years Helmut had an office in the Andover Harvard Library to which many of us graduate students had keys. Its door festooned a bumper sticker that declared “powered by ouzo,” this office became the gathering place for generations of students who worked on Helmut's Archaeology of the New Testament publications, which sought to explain how material culture could be used to contextualize and to understand earliest Christianity.

Helmut's intellectual prowess and personal and intellectual generosity were always especially evident when it came to archaeology and the study of the New Testament. I traveled on his famous course several times when I was his student, and now teach a version of it, with a final trip to Greece and Turkey, every other year, as he did. For years, each time Helmut taught the course, he said it would be for the last time. Year after year, he kept teaching it, in part because he loved the intellectual work, in part because he loved the friendships that emerged from that intellectual work. Helmut this past spring named it a love between colleagues, moved as he was to experience this love as many former students came to town to visit him and to thank him.

On those trips, we were often accompanied by Gisela and sometimes by one or another of Helmut's dear friends—David Mitten, Klaus Baltzer, Klaus Nohlen, Charalambos Bakirtis. Other friends joined us in the field, on archaeological sites: Greeks, Germans, Austrians, French, an international conclave of lovers of epigraphy, stones, ancient religion. Helmut welcomed his Harvard students into this larger intellectual family. And even if Gisela wasn't present on one leg of our trip, he mentioned her intellectual contributions as well. Near any Demeter sanctuary, and especially at Pergamon, he would say to students, "If Gisela were here, she could tell you more." The trip was an intellectual feast, with Helmut teaching equally well at 9 in the morning on an archaeological site, at 2 in the afternoon on a brief seaside break, at 10 at night over retsina. His generosity often extended to giving real feasts as well—he would from time to time tell students to put away our small bags of bread and cheese, that he would provide the dinner.

Year after year, students on such trips celebrated Helmut's intellectual and personal generosity. One time, I remember, we students at the end of five weeks of travel together in Greece and Turkey wanted to honor Helmut's contribution to our lives. In the town of Selçuk, Turkey, a short distance from Ephesos, we begged a Turkish sculptor, who happened to be beautifully working stone in the open plaza, to carve for us a fake fragmentary inscription. We were inspired by all the honorific inscriptions to Roman emperors. We wrote it out carefully on a scrap of paper: . . . HELMUTON THEON. . . , Helmut, a god. The sculptor carved it. On the roof deck of the hotel that night, overlooking nesting storks and the glowing marble remains of the Justinianic period Church of St. John, we proudly presented the small inscription to him, a token of our

affection. Ever precise, Helmut pointed out that the inscription contained two problems in the Greek: we had introduced a misspelling, and technically the words should have been in the dative, not the accusative.

Helmut. Intellectually precise, intellectual vibrant, even in this last hard year. Helmut. Intellectually and personally generous, adored by many students. Helmut, whose work continues to move forward into new generations of students, then working their ways into new academic books and into church sermons alike. I close with a pericope from 1 Thessalonians, which I won't interpret too much, because Helmut's commentary will trump anything I can say. But these verses, Paul's description of his work among those at Thessalonikē reminds me of Helmut's own role among his students. "You know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you"—and the passage continues— "to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into God's own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 1:11-12, RSV). We celebrate the life and life's work of Helmut Koester, who led a worthy life, whose scholarship detailed the earliest Christian ideas of God's own kingdom and glory.