

BOOK REVIEW

Green, Joel, and Lee McDonald (eds.), *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). xxiv + 616 pp. Hbk. \$49.99.

Jesus and his historical context, the relationship between theology and biblical studies, and the proper interpretation and contemporary significance of the Christian Scriptures are all areas of endless research in contemporary Christian academia. Publications on these topics can be particularly intimidating for those without formal training in New Testament studies, especially since the breadth of scholarship can make studying Scripture appear overly complicated to those who consider the reading of Scripture as an integral part of everyday Christian life. *The World of the New Testament* can help to alleviate some of this anxiety because it is a one-stop introduction to every major aspect of the first-century world. With over two-dozen authors and forty-four short chapters, those interested in getting their hands dirty with primitive Christianity will find few stones unturned. All contributors identify themselves as Christians (to my knowledge), most are members of the IBR (Institute for Biblical Research) and most specialize in fields directly related to New Testament studies. The content itself is arranged into five parts, each serving as a distinct lens to examine the New Testament's context: (1) Exile and the Jewish Heritage; (2) Roman Hellenism; (3) The Jewish People in the Context of Roman Hellenism; (4) The Literary Context of Early Christianity; and (5) The Geographical Context of the New Testament. The average length of the chapters runs from 10 to 13 pages. The book also exhibits four indexes, a fair number of photos and illustrations (black and white), a four-page timetable of 'major events related to the study of the New Testament' (p. 18), a glossary and two appendices on currency and measurements.

One immediate, practical reflection on this book is that it could possibly be implemented as a new undergraduate or graduate course text in the Christian Studies Program that I oversee. The book is an

extremely efficient one-volume solution for those craving immersion in the original context of the Christian faith, and readers will come away with more clarity than confusion on New Testament backgrounds. It is hard to imagine students graduating from a Christian higher educational institution not being exposed to such essential content, and because it may make pedagogical sense to develop a course around this material instead of spreading it out across New Testament introductions, courses on individual biblical books and so on, *The World of the New Testament* could fit the ticket.

The book as a whole is a thoroughly enjoyable read. Generally, no chapter was a disappointment. Although some were written better than others, most were written very clearly and concisely with a consistent tone. There was never a question about resources for further study; annotated bibliographies are found at the end of each chapter. The authors were familiar enough with their research to provide helpful summaries about where the research/consensus is now. The well-paced change in subject matter also prevents boredom.

A third reflection (related to the first) is on whether the volume is meant to serve as a textbook at all. At first sight, it does not seem to be. There is not a clear semester-based arrangement, nor are there chapter questions, review sections, vocabulary lists and other features commonly found in textbooks (the Baker website did not list any classroom resources). The book also cannot compete with standard Bible dictionaries (e.g. *Anchor, New Interpreter's*, etc.), so it does not seem appropriate to call it a reference work. At any rate, the book can indeed serve as a textbook, granted that professors are willing to develop their own tests/evaluations. For competitive liberal arts colleges with high caliber students, the book can serve as an undergraduate text without much worry. However, the book probably fits best in a seminary setting.

Finally, there were a handful of minor but noticeable oddities. For example, a person wanting to know about the structure of government during the life of Jesus would probably turn to the chapters on 'Civic and Voluntary Associations', or 'Economics, Taxes, and Tithes'. However, the most thorough discussion on this topic is found under the last section on geography. Even then, this topic—which one would think occupies central importance for New Testament backgrounds—remained confusing and somewhat disjointed. A layered, chronological outline of government leaders (emperors, client kings, procurators, etc.)

or a chart that organizes and describes various government structures, such as those found in many study Bibles, would have been extremely helpful. The same goes for taxes, which are addressed regularly but not given any coherent visual or diagrammatic presentation. This point is especially noteworthy, given that the contributors and editors found it necessary to include entire tables for Panhellenic Deities (pp. 108-109), the cost of producing letters in today's U.S. dollars (p. 361), Jewish High Priests (p. 201), the Herodian Dynasty (p. 67) and other topics that one might think are less central than those more directly and explicitly addressed in the New Testament.

Other minor complaints include the following: (1) I was surprised that the Latin inscription of Pilate's name found at Caesarea Maritima was not mentioned in James Charlesworth's chapter on 'Jesus Research and Archaeology', which was otherwise excellent; (2) The annotated bibliographies seemed quite unbalanced across the book, with some having no more than four entries and others with a list occupying several pages; and (3) It may have helped to have devoted chapters to the Septuagint, or at least to the New Testament use of the Old Testament and hermeneutical procedures of the first century. This would have helped to tie together relevant odds and ends found throughout the book.

While there is plenty of room for a revised or second edition, the first edition of *The World of the New Testament* is anything but a disappointment. The scholarship is robust, recent and understandable. This feature alone is more than what many books in biblical studies can offer. I am personally skeptical of some of the 'symposium-type' volumes in the publishing industry because they often exist for no other reason than to provide assistant professors and budding scholars opportunities to get published. This often results in the publication of under-developed ideas and even pseudo-scholarship on occasion. Thankfully, this is no such volume. For that reason, I wholeheartedly desire that the 'consumption' of this publication will be as high as its demand, and that, as a result, churches and small groups scattered across the English-speaking world will encounter Jesus of Nazareth with greater intelligence.

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