

## BOOK REVIEW

Moyer V. Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World: A Narrative Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). 271 pp. Pbk. US\$24.95.

Hubbard's evocative work describes the cultural influences that prevailed in the Greco-Roman world of the first century, the world in which Christianity spread its roots and began to flourish. Hubbard begins each chapter with a fictional narrative based on a name found on an ancient inscription. The narratives present an account of what Hubbard conceives everyday life was like for various classes of people in the first century Greco-Roman world. These stories lead the characters in a fictional encounter with Paul as he traveled about as an itinerant preacher and tent-maker. These sections will appeal to the post-modern penchant for story-telling and do provide a glimpse into a world completely foreign to the modern reader.

Hubbard follows each narrative section with an overview of various aspects of first-century cultural conditions, highlighting societal aspects of the Greco-Roman world that influenced the spread of the gospel as well as affecting Christian self-identification. These sections include discussions on Religion and Superstition, Education, Philosophy and Oratory, City and Society, and finally, Household and Family. Unquestionably, the vast array of inscriptions included throughout the pages of this work is invaluable. Hubbard aptly uses inscriptions found in the general geographical area of Pauline ministry under discussion in the section. This single feature makes this monograph useful to the undergraduate student looking for a general understanding of first-century life in the Greco-Roman world. The annotated bibliography at the end of each section provides a helpful selection of primary documents for the student interested in further research.

A major question with a work like Hubbard's monograph is, how reflective are the inscriptions of everyday life in the Greco-Roman world? Illiteracy was high in the first century (something Hubbard

himself acknowledges) and thus the inscriptions he uses reflect a miniscule portion and social demographic section of society. Any generalizations made about first-century societal conditions must grapple with this aspect of the documentation available. Hubbard does not adequately address this potential skewing of the available data. He does, however, attempt to employ inscriptions that were written by the dissidents in society, those who were counter-cultural and spoke against, or at least revealed the injustices faced by, the masses.

The Religion and Superstition section of his book provides a wealth of information concerning the religious practices of the first century and, although there is a lot of information, there is very little new research documented. Most of this detail is well known. His application of the material to experiences in the book of Acts and to Paul's letters can help the student better understand the possible implications of or reason for the events.

Hubbard provides some useful information about the differences in the ministries of Paul and Jesus. Where Jesus was 'a man of the village', Paul was 'a man of the city' and hence the types of illustrations they use differ considerably. Jesus employs many agrarian images in his parables and examples, while in Paul's letters there are many more references to athletes, magistrates and merchants. Each was adept at addressing their audience in a convincing way. Paul used many references appropriate to the gymnasium, which demonstrates his acute awareness of life in the Greco-Roman world.

The entire section on City and Society demonstrates the often complex prospect of maneuvering within the ancient world and the pressures faced by the city leaders. Enormous demands pressured leaders to conform to Roman laws. These were challenging times in which a riot could have devastating results in the form of punishment from Rome.

At times, Hubbard appears to portray events and societal influences on Christianity in an overzealous way. His conclusions sometimes contradict the evidence from the scriptural material itself. Hubbard suggests that Corinthians 'relished oratory', having been fed on it from birth (p. 97). This conclusion seems biased and incorrect based on Paul's own evaluation of the makeup of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1.26). The poor masses had little time to spend listening to the rhetoricians in the marketplace.

Hubbard also contradicts his own conclusions in at least one instance. In attempting to show how philosophical teachers influenced

the leaders and beliefs of Christianity, Hubbard argues that Paul had a lot in common with the Stoics of his day. He then argues that Paul transcends them so greatly that they would have held him in derision. Counter to the views of the Stoics, Paul placed an emphasis on love. This divergence argues persuasively against, rather than for, Paul's affinity to Stoicism. The fact that Paul overlaps on some of the topics discussed by the Stoics should be expected since both attempted to address the issues of life. It would be very strange indeed if there were no common concerns.

Overall, this book is a valuable tool for the student of the Bible or general interest reader who wishes to better understand the prevailing cultural influences as the church came into existence and began to grow in the first century.

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