
In recent years, Old Testament studies have seen a measurable increase in interest in the ancient Near Eastern culture, language, and peoples that formed the context for the Israelites and the Hebrew Scriptures. More recently, interest in the Roman world that formed the context of Jesus’ life and the formation of the New Testament Scriptures has received similar attention. In The New Testament and Its Social Environment, John Stambaugh, a classicist and Roman historian, and David Balch, a New Testament scholar, have collaborated for the purpose of answering the question, “What were the societies like in which the early Christian movement took root, and what characteristics of those societies can help us to understand that movement’s rise and spread?” (10).

Summary

The authors present their thesis in the preface to the work. They propose to “discuss the political, religious, economic, and social features of Palestine and of the cities of the Roman empire and synthesize the results of recent scholarly work, to help the reader understand the relationship between the earliest Christians and the world around them” (11). In order to accomplish this task, the authors divide the work into six chapters. Chapters one through three, detailing the historical background, mobility and mission, and the ancient economy, are written by Stambaugh. Chapter four on society in Palestine is written by Balch. The two then co-write chapters five and six on city life and Christianity in the cities of the Roman Empire.

Chapter one looks primarily at the dominance of Greek culture and Roman institutions in the New Testament environment, identifying the reasons for and providing discussions of each of these realities (13). Among the issues discussed is the provincial organization of the Romans,
the Roman rule of Palestine, and Roman and local law. One of the key points regarding the relationship of Roman legislation to Christianity is the lack of any specific legislation forbidding Christianity. Stambaugh asserts that this may help explain the sporadic persecution of Christians as opposed to a consistently applied penalty according to the law (33).

In chapter two, Stambaugh highlights the movement going on in this time period. He identifies various forms of communication, such as highways, seas, letter writing, traveling public, and migration. He then discusses the movement of religions, pointing out that since the cults that were rising did not pose a threat to the Empire, they were not only accommodated by the Empire, but oftentimes encouraged (45). With respect to the spread of Christianity specifically, Stambaugh makes two points. First, the method by which the message spread was through personal involvement, sermons to various sized groups, letters, and witnessing (56-57). Second, he identifies the oneness of God and the abolition of the Jewish law as two unique teachings that interested many in a polytheistic culture that emphasized cultic ritual (57). Moreover, Stambaugh notes that Jewish persecution of Christians, beginning with the preaching and death of Stephen, forced Christians to leave Jerusalem, but this only added to the spread of Christianity throughout the Empire (60). Chapter three then deals with the economy of the Empire. Stambaugh surveys the private, municipal, and imperial finances.

In chapter four, Balch seeks to answer questions about the society of Palestine. He begins with demography, estimating the population of Palestine at around three million. Balch next addresses the pattern of life, from family life to community life to religious life. With respect to languages, Balch notes that there were four primary languages used in Palestine during this time period: Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew (87). He argues that little Latin was spoken in Palestine, and while some Hebrew was spoken and written, evidence for it is sparse (87-88).
Rather, Greek appears to have been equally in use by Christians and Jews, while Jews (and some others) spoke Aramaic (87-88). Another feature of Balch’s chapter is on the religious leaders, namely the Sadducees, priest, scribes, and Pharisees (97-101).

Chapter five discusses city life, including both the physical and social environment. With respect to the social environment, the authors focus on the various classes, identifying upper and lower (no middle). The upper classes were few in number, but they controlled much of the wealth and power, so they stood out (112). The lower classes, consisting of the majority of the population, had its own distinction between an intermediate level (perhaps a little lower than but functioning similar to our modern middle class), which included small landowners, craftsmen, and shopkeepers, and the lowest level of those who had no property and were forced to work at the docks, in construction, or on farms (112). Though these classes were fairly clear, there was some opportunity for and evidence of upward movement in social classes (113). The authors also discuss work, play, education, family, clubs, and cults.

In chapter six, the authors compare Christian churches to similar institutions in the Greco-Roman cities in order to demonstrate how Greeks and Romans would have perceived the churches (138). Though there are similarities between the churches and other institutions that the authors will points out, they also highlight how Christians were careful to distinguish themselves from these various institutions, especially pagan mystery cults, by intentionally avoiding applying vocabulary that may suggest these other institutions (138). One of the defining features of the early Christian churches was house churches; these “were the basic cells of the growing church” (140). The authors next discuss the major centers of religious activity, especially Antioch in Syria, Ephesus in Asia Minor, Philippi and Thessalonica in Macedonia, Corinth in Achaia, Rome, and Alexandria in Egypt.
Critical Evaluation

The authors’ stated goal in this work is to “discuss the political, religious, economic, and social features of Palestine and of the cities of the Roman empire and synthesize the results of recent scholarly work, to help the reader understand the relationship between the earliest Christians and the world around them” (11). In this task they are quite successful. The authors are thorough in their presentation of the social world of the New Testament, dealing with issues as wide-ranging as religious practices, social classes, economic concerns, and government to name a few. The only major category of this kind that is missing is a discussion of the natural environment (weather), though the authors may have chosen to omit such discussion on the basis that the weather, unlike the culture, is very much the same today as it was then. The authors explore in good detail issues like the value of money, a day’s wage, and how luxury items were comparatively more expensive than they are today, making it less likely for one of that time period to possess luxury items than it would be for a modern reader (80-81). Similar detail is given to issues such as the social classes and the possibility of moving upwards or downwards in the class scale based on faithful or unfaithful service to the ideals of society (116).

Another strength of the work lies in the authors’ recognition of minute details that have parallels in Scripture. For example, they note how the interior streets of cities were usually paved, yet sufficiently dusty for one to shake off the dust as prescribed in Matthew 10:14, Mark 6:11, and other passages (107), and for the need to wash one’s feet once inside a house as evidenced in Luke 7:38-46 and John 12:3 among others (107). Another example of this type of detail is with respect to the types of houses. Many houses outside of Palestine were more than one story, but the houses in Palestine tended to be single-storied. In more crowded cities, however, houses often had several units and several stories, which explains how it was possible
for a boy to fall out of a third-story window at the house at Troas during Paul’s preaching (109; Acts 20:9). This type of addition by the authors helps place certain biblical events in the context of the social world they are describing.

However, though several places evidence parallels similar to these two, the work at no point attempts to show how this survey of the social world of the New Testament aids the reader in the interpretation of the New Testament. Granted, this is not a stated goal of the authors’; nevertheless, the increased interest in the social world around the New Testament has largely, if not almost entirely, been for the purpose of illuminating the world in order to increase understanding of the text in interpretation. Though the information presented in the work makes significant contributions to that discipline, the authors themselves do not apply the principles on a large scale to that specific aspect of the discipline. Though it does not detract from the work in itself, since they make no claim to accomplish this task, it does limit the applicability of the work. Moreover, it will likely limit the book’s audience, since those who have little background in this discipline will be unable to apply many of its conclusions to interpretation and thus will do well to seek out a different survey that does provide some guidelines for application.

On a more specific level, there are a couple places where the authors do not fully develop their argument. For example, they assert that Christian churches had many similarities with other religious institutions of the time period. Yet the first example they give of the thiasoi and collegia does not convince. They note how all worshiped some god, most depended on the generosity of one or several patrons to supplement the other members, and some claimed to be legitimate funerary collegia to avoid persecution (140-141). The first similarity is too broad as it includes nearly all of the inhabitants of the Roman world. If anything, the description of these pagan practices and how they needed regulations against inappropriate behavior seems to point
to a fundamental dissimilarity with Christian churches that tended to be in homes and non-disruptive to the community (140). The second similarity, regarding the generosity of wealthy patrons to supplement ordinary members, does seem to be a legitimate similarity. The authors do mention how hosting house churches seems to be one form of this wealthy patron support; however, they make no mention of the whole community’s involvement in the Lord’s Supper or Acts 2:45 where numerous believers sold all that they had to care for the poor among them. Thus, even the second similarity does not seem to completely describe the Christian community’s distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other religious institutions. Finally, the fact that some churches in the third century attempted to avoid persecution by describing itself as a legitimate funerary collegia has two problems. First, the authors give no first century example of this, thus making it unclear whether anyone before the third century associated themselves in this way. Second, the strongest part of Tertullian’s argument that the churches were funerary collegia is that both groups exist for funerary purposes (141). While the church does perform this service, it is clearly not a central focus of their frequent meetings, and thus evidences again more of a dissimilarity than a similarity with these other religious institutions. The authors in this case need to provide more evidence to show the similarities between the groups.

Conclusion

In final reflection, it is difficult to assess the value of this work as a whole. For those who have some idea of how to apply these ideas to the reading of Scripture, it would be valuable as a resource for understanding the culture of the time period. However, for those without any training in application of this type of material, the authors provide no help and thus leave the reader with some interesting history, but no idea of how to use it or how it helps. It would benefit both the authors and the readers to write a final chapter that answers the “So what?” question. An
additional chapter highlighting the possible ways this study can aid New Testament study and interpretation would be extremely helpful and would appeal to a wider audience of readers.