

[MJTM 14 (2012–2013)]

BOOK REVIEW

Gary M. Burge. *Jesus and the Jewish Festivals*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. xix + 139 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780310280477.

Burge, a theology and biblical studies professor at Wheaton College, presents this book as the final contribution to Zondervan's Ancient Context, Ancient Faith series, of which Burge is also the series editor. His strong publication record features a number of items intended for the education of the laity, and this is reflected in the Ancient Context, Ancient Faith series as a whole.

The most striking feature of this work is its attractiveness: the book's layout is beautifully designed with patterned margins and highlights, colorful photographs (most pages have at least one), and the occasional table or diagram. It is almost completely filled with color photographs from the modern Middle East, images of museum exhibits, and prints of historical artwork depicting biblical themes under discussion. Occasionally, the prominent role artwork plays in this work overwhelms, leaving little room for the main text and making it difficult to read (e.g., p. 38). However, the reliance on illustrations to communicate remains very effective in providing a greater understanding of the physical elements of the culture in which Jesus lived, such as food, agriculture, and sacrifice.

The book is not a reference work or commentary and is designed for easy reading. It lacks study questions, meaning that it is best suited for personal education and enjoyment rather than as a study guide for church groups, but this should not be confused with a lack of content. Burge's discussion of the feasts is written in simple and easy-to-understand prose, yet is not shallow or deficient in information. Methodologically, the author largely depends upon cultural anthropology and archaeology to

illuminate biblical backgrounds but this is undertaken in an accessible, non-technical manner. He helpfully emphasizes the easily-forgotten differences between the Western and biblical worlds, especially in terms of the different attitudes towards the purpose of religious practices.

Jesus and the Jewish Festivals explores the importance of the Sabbath and three major Jewish festivals for Judaism: the Passover, the feast of Tabernacles, and Hanukkah. The first chapter illustrates the social-commemorative function of festivals in Judaism and how their importance compares and contrasts with contemporary examples. His explanation of how the Jewish calendar, illustrated in a table on p. 26, merges agriculture with national historical events is helpful since this is not widely known among laity. The second through fifth chapters explore the significance of the Sabbath and the three selected festivals, while the final two chapters explore Passover imagery in the death of Jesus and how the Jewish festivals were adopted and their meaning changed as they were commemorated by early Christians. In this book Burge concludes that while there is deep meaning in the Jewish festivals themselves, Christian theology is to a large degree a reinterpretation and reapplication of this symbolism, although appreciation of this fact has been lost with the passage of time.

Consistent with Burge's background in Johannine studies, much of this book is devoted to exploring how the implied feast imagery in the Gospel of John informs our understanding of Christology. Mentioning other works that explore the feasts in John, Burge's select bibliography cites some of the most commonly used sources in scholarship, many of which are older. Among these are Danby's translation of the Mishnah, E. P. Sanders's *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, Craig Keener's commentary on the Gospel of John, and Gale Yee's *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John*. More recent works such as Dorit Felsch's *Die Feste im Johannesevangelium* and Mary Spaulding's *Commemorative Identities* are not cited, but as this is a book designed for pleasant education rather than theological research or sermon preparation, this is of little concern.

This small book is successful in shedding greater light on

Jesus' world and how understanding his environment can influence our interpretation of the Gospels, especially John and the Synoptic parables. The educated lay person will find this book informative and useful, and the pastor will value its references to Josephus and the Mishnah. It is well suited for inclusion in a church library, or display on a coffee table in a home, visiting area, or office waiting room. Individuals may also enjoy reading it casually over the course of a few free evenings for personal benefit.

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