

[*MJTM* 10 (2008–2009) R13–R15]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green. *The New Testament in Antiquity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. Hdbk. 479 pp. US\$49.99; CDN \$53.99.

This impressive New Testament introduction and survey was written by three professors from Wheaton College, designed as a textbook for North American undergraduate students. As would be expected from the background of the authors, the book seeks to stand firmly within the tradition of evangelical biblical interpretation.

The book's student-friendly features include: almost 500 full-color maps, photos, charts, and drawings relevant to the subject matter; numerous sidebars; chapters short enough to be read through in 30 to 60 minutes; minimal footnotes; discussion questions and a short, graded bibliography at the end of each chapter; and a heavy book construction that guarantees long usefulness of the volume whether it is kept for reference or passed on to succeeding classes of students. The book's 27 chapters divide the material into units that can be covered, two a week, in a typical semester. There are special chapters on the historical reliability of the story of Jesus (including a sidebar on the Jesus Seminar), the life of Paul (with a sidebar on the New Perspective on Paul), and the textual history of the New Testament. Other important issues in New Testament study today are also explained to orient students who are in the early stages of familiarity with this field of study. Scripture and subject indexes make it easy for readers to find material they need.

The book has some special features that mark it off from similar introductions. Most books start the discussion of each book of the New Testament with matters like author and date. *The New Testament in Antiquity* begins with the message of the

book, and saves these matters for the end of each chapter. This is a clear indication that the authors see the message of the New Testament as being more central and important, while author and date considerations are more peripheral. This goes along with their insistence that students also read the entire New Testament text along with the textbook.

Another feature, reflected in the title, is the book's sustained interest in the context of the New Testament in the ancient Mediterranean world. There are separate chapters or sections on methodology, the historical background, geography, the Jewish cultural environment, and Greco-Roman culture. The wealth of excellent illustrations support this emphasis. The authors have drawn heavily on the work of the Context Group, a group of scholars dedicated to using the insights of social science to understand biblical events and relationships. References to an "honor and shame" culture and "patronage," for example, are common. The book emphasizes that reading the New Testament is a cross-cultural exercise, in which we cannot always assume that we understand what is going on just from our own background.

A third feature is the use of illustrations of ancient coins. One of the authors has expertise in coins, and they are pictured often, especially in their capacity as vehicles of propaganda. The theme logo of the book is the Roman coin depicting *Judea capta*.

The main criticisms of this book, understandably, are due to its attempt to cover so much and keep it so simple. Nuances that many would think are important have been omitted. To keep the book to the desired length, much that some teachers and scholars would like to see in an introduction has been left out. A brief survey of internet reviewers reveals one unhappy that the treatment of rhetoric is weak, another thinks there should be more on hermeneutics, while a third wanted more on women. At least this leaves room for a teacher to demonstrate his or her worth to the students by adding material not in the book!

On the down side, I think the book is sometimes over-enthusiastic in its embrace of social-science criticism. For example, it is true that the patronage system operated in Roman society, but to uncritically accept that it operated in Jewish

circles to the extent that the relationship of Jesus to God the Father can be understood in terms of patronage (p. 170) is certainly stretching the evidence. As the field of social-science criticism continues to evolve, some of the ways the book treats this approach may become outdated.

The labels of some of the illustrations are also misleading. Here are a few examples. Apart from the embarrassing identification of POxy 52 as P52 on page 16 (an error that the editors are aware of and have promised to amend in future printings), the caption on a photograph of a manuscript page of the Gospel of Thomas on page 112 says that it was discovered in 1945 at Oxyrhynchus. Actually, some Greek fragments of the Gospel of Thomas were discovered at Oxyrhynchus in 1897, 1903, and 1905, whereas the Coptic document pictured was found at Nag Hammadi in 1945. On page 377, the caption for the picture from Pompeii of Terentius Neo says that the woman holds a book, whereas actually she has a wax tablet in her hand. On page 451 is a photograph of the sheet of a Greek harmony of the Gospels found at Dura Europos. The caption says it is a sheet of Tatian's Diatessaron, found in 1935, whereas the actual date of discovery was 1933. Neither is there any hint of the controversy over whether this is actually part of Tatian's work.

These errors are probably due to the authors' and editors' lack of specialized expertise in areas somewhat peripheral to the thrust of the book. The book is still a fine introductory text, but due to such minor errors has less value as a reference volume. Perhaps future editions of the book will be able to rectify this, as users who do have the expertise point out the errors. Most North American evangelical teachers and students of New Testament Introduction and Survey will enjoy using this book. It is so contextualized for America, however, that it might need adaptation to be completely suitable for classrooms in other parts of the world.

Lois Dow  
McMaster Divinity College