

Book Review: John. Stambaugh & D.L. Bach *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1986.(2248 words)

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### Objective of the Books

With reference to the Preface (p.11) in the book, it is written its objective:

*the objective of the authors 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.*

In Glenn Hinson's book review<sup>1</sup> stated, which I agreed, the authors use sociological approach related the Jesus movement or Christianity and the livelihood and society in Greek-Roman time, the so-called "social environment". This gives different conjectures on how interactions between Christianity and the "social environment". They claimed particularly how Christianity adapted urban social culture so as how Christianity penetrated into cities at the time. Along the deliberation, only few archaeological evidences are presented. For me, with social science training background, the arguments are not very scientific.

### Presentation of the Content

The authors organised the features of "social environment" in the first 5 chapters:

In terms of the style of the presentation of the two authors on these 5 chapters, it is written in journalistic style (a readable format) and on comprehensive account of features as I summarized below, also mentioned by Hinson<sup>2</sup>. It is aimed for seminary students and teachers who have little background knowledge. However, for general public who like to know more about the background of earlier Christianity, the arguments by the authors are not very convince.

### Features of the Social Environment

*Political Matter:* In Chapter 1, the authors described that independent movement of Jews in Palestine during 300B.C.-100A.D. gone through a mixture of independence and dependence under the world powers around them. Amongst the control under Alexander

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<sup>1</sup> Hinson, Glenn (2009) *Book Review: The New Testament in Its Social Environment By John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. Library of Early Christianity Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1986. 195 pp.* Church History Vol. 55 Issue 4: p.503 Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn (2009) pp.503.

and Hellenistic Kingdoms (Ptolemies and Seleucids) there was a period of 100 year, Judean got the independence under a family of wealthy rural priest (Maccabees).

It is mentioned but without a deep analysis why the Judean failed and lost its political independence to Roman Empire, which favoured an oligarchical style of government. There are no arguments on whether the internal conflict in Maccabees or the belief of saviour of Israel from David's family is matter. The land was then administrated by the Herod kings but later became the Roman province ruled by Roman Empire governors after the Jewish Wars with Romans.

Although the authors describe the political environment of Judea was different under the control of the Hellenistic Kingdoms, where the local aristocracies could remain as a separate political entity, although culturally influenced by Greek ways but the local populations were in peace with the ruling power. They have not stressed on the reasons behind.

After the conquered by Alexander the Great, the reader may want to know how Judea gave up its adopted Persian culture to embrace Greek culture wholly. What were the reasons behind it, how did it shape the independent movement of Judean against the Greek and what religious practices were developed to influence the people in the Jesus mission. The book does not mention much. The authors just briefly mentions some incidents but does not evaluate their significance.

*Religions:* In Chapter 2, the authors emphasized the development of communications, in terms of highways, safer sea route, letter writing of common format, and traveling public in Hellenistic-Roman time, for the spread of religions. Then they discuss the Jews living outside of Israel, and the impact that the Greco-Roman world had on them. They note that the language of the Diaspora Jews was predominantly Greek, and that many of them adopted customs and regulations similar to those of the Greek cities. In general, the Jews in the Diaspora made certain accommodations to the pagan world in which they lived while still maintaining their own distinct beliefs and practices in synagogues.

The Jews followed the Torah and practiced rituals and ceremonies such as the Sabbath and annual festivals. These ceremonies became symbols of Jewish identity, although there were sectarian differences amongst places they lived subject to the different administrative practices and local law in how strictly they were observed. Different regions with different status under the Roman Empire but Judeans maintained their religious practices under the influence of Pharisees. Authors should critically draw up some conclusion whether these factors shape the diversified faction of Jews before the Jew war with Roman.

Furthermore, the special characteristics of Christian Missions are discussed but the book should discuss more on conversion to Christianity, the transition from a Jewish movement to a Gentile movement, the transition from a rural to an urban environment, the organization of the early Christian communities, and the attitudes of authorities towards the Christians.

#### *Economic, Social, and City Features*

In Chapter 3, the readers get the idea that the Roman and Greek economies were based on a barter-commodity money economy. In early Greece, aristocrats developed reciprocal relationships of friendship, providing hospitality, exchanging gifts and forming alliances with other important families in the same area. Neighbours could look to them for protection and help, and in return, the aristocrats could expect political support and help with harvests. In the Roman economy, the relationship between social superiors and their inferiors was formalized in the clientele system, where the patron provided protection and support to the dependent clients in exchange for votes at election time.

Long-distance trade was in the hands of private entrepreneurs, and most commercial activity was local. Farms within easy distance of towns supplied their food and most raw materials, and manufacturing was done in small workshops for local consumption. Investments were limited to a relatively small scale, and no regime in the Roman Empire ever drew up a detailed long-range budget. Local finance usually is supported by local elites. The lack of systematic economic planning meant that natural disaster, such as drought could strike with devastating force, as no contingency plans had been made in advance.

The title of the book is about New Testament, and since narratives of all Gospels and the Acts of New Testament were mostly happened there, authors devoted a chapter (Chapter 4), to describe the society there around that time.

It is said that Hellenistic culture was most prominent in Palestine in the sphere of trade and industry, as well as in political organization. Palestinian villages, like those in Galilee, were ruled by a village clerk and a commandant.

As an example of Jewish been respected, and avoiding provoking conflict against Jewish belief, buildings in Palestine avoided images of humans and animals, and only floral and geometric designs were used for decoration.

Since Jesus mission was mostly around Galilee, authors write a lot about it. Taxes fell heavily on Galilean peasants, who had to pay tribute to Rome and support Herod's lavish

building projects. Many were living barely above the subsistence level. The book implicitly see the difficulty for survival as the factor that stimulated the revolutionary cause in in Upper Galilee, where Jewish and non-Jewish populations clashed.

The book describes the population of Jews was compact in Judea. Jews in the Holy City practised differently by praying in Temple, observing the Sabbath and annual festivals, and sending a half-shekel tax to the Temple. As Jesus's work was amongst the poor, in the rural area, and those been side-lined by the society built up the tension between the priest and Jesus, implicitly implied by the authors.

Many Paul's letter address to believers in cities in New Testament, the book's authors described Roman city life in Chapter 5 with a view that people studying New Testament could have better understanding its background. In Roman society, majority of people are slaves or just become free-born people, city activities described are not designed for them.

Many Greek cities, the central agora functioned as a marketplace and civic centre, for people lived in there, mentioned in the book. Shrines and temples of polytheism were scattered around the city, as well as a gymnasium, where young people went to school and adults would come to watch and participate in events, and a theatre, where religious festivals were celebrated with musical and dramatic performances served the privilege classes. In Roman time, they were patriarchal society. Teachings in early church were quite new, the view mentioned by the authors.

In Chapter 3-5, the authors researched on scholar works quiet extensively about the economy of Palestine under Roman rule highlighting the taxation system, economic opportunities and economic disparities between different social classes provide a richer understanding into the daily lives of people and the societal structures within which the early Christian movement developed.

*The Interplay of Christianity:* Chapter 6 describes how Christian churches adopted as a distinct institution. Christians used Jewish synagogues as a way to approach Gentile. By contrast the way the Jew impose similar apartheid to Gentile interesting in Judaism, that provides a comparative advantage for Christian to attract non-Jew into Christianity. Besides, early church were careful not to use same vocabulary or practices, not to be mistaken as pagan cults.

The authors emphasized that households formed the church base, but it is socially inclusive, with a dynamic connection with a worldwide society, include slaves and free-born persons as exhortation is address on all.

The chapter also describes how early Christians adapted different urban social patterns in Antioch (Syria), Ephesus (ancient cities in area of Turkey and Greece today), Rome (Italy) and Alexandria (Africa).

The authors see Christianity in the cities of the Roman Empire characterized by its intellectual tradition of interpreting Jewish tradition influenced within the terms of Greek philosophy, the presence of bishops and theologians like Demetrius, Origen and Clement of Alexandria, and the presence of Gnostics such as Basilides and Valentinus.

### General Comments

No doubt that the book discusses the physical environment, population, and areas of social interaction, such as work, play, the family, voluntary groups, and religious cults, of the Greco-Roman cities of the Roman empire in which the first generations of Christians lived. It give a good comparison of the organization of the early Christian communities with analogous phenomena in the pagan world and surveys the specific urban centres of Christian activity that were important in the New Testament.

With reference to Book review by Harrington (1986)<sup>3</sup>,

*by giving us some sense of what it was like to live in that world, Greco-Roman world, they helped to balance the excessive concentration on abstract ideas that have often characterised NT scholarship.*

The book certainly enrich our imagination about the time of Jesus and Paul in NT and broaden our contextual understanding and the considerations of Jesus teachings and Paul's teachings .

However, the book does not address the negative reaction to controversial teaching in disciples' letters and 4 gospels amongst the non-believer communities and Judaism during 30-70 A.D. Although in respect to the 400 years account of the social environment in the book, it is a relative short period but the events are much relevant to the development of early Christianity building up the foundation theology of the New Testament.

It seems to us the title of the book not comprehensive enough to represent the full content of the book. The authors has written content extensively about the society and historical

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<sup>3</sup> Harrington, Daniel L, (1986) *Book Review: The New Testament in Its Social Environment By John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. Library of Early Christianity Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1986. 195 pp. Theological Studies Vol. 47 Issue 3: p.518-519.*

development background long before Jesus's time and early church period, mainly covered the development of "social environment" after the Second Temple.

One of the Authors' objective is also to syntheses scholarly work in the studying of New Testament. They analyse the governance structures, including the role of local rulers, the Roman administrative system, and the impact of imperial policies on the region but pay little attention to the political tensions between Jewish groups and Roman authorities, which could more insights on the backdrop of the New Testament narratives. No doubt that not including the studies on Second Temple Judaism, various Jewish sects, and the diversity of religious beliefs and practices within Judaism at the time may limit the understanding of encompasses the emergence of Christianity and its development within this religious milieu.

Synthesizing the latest research involves comparing and contrasting different scholarly arguments, looking at the archaeological findings, historical documents, and bringing together various academic disciplines such as history, theology, sociology, and anthropology to provide a holistic view of the period. The authors fail in this aspect.

Besides, an interdisciplinary approaches that findings often come from different disciplines, which might combine textual analysis with archaeological data, or insights from sociology and anthropology with historical research which certainly fit for the title and the objective. An illustration using comparing the situation in Palestine with other parts of the Roman Empire can throw some lights on the particularities of Palestine's experience under Roman rule and how that influenced the development of early Christianity. This puts the book to a different level.

In conclusion, it is a good book for students without historical and social background of the time of New Testament but not a book to induce interest to the subject.