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REVIEW

Bruce J. Malina, John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Deutero-Pauline Letters*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013.

Bruce Malina and John Pilch, known for their social-scientific approach of the New Testament and early Christianity propose here a third commentary in the *Social-Science Commentary* series, following that on the Book of Revelation (2003) and on the letters of Paul (2006). The commentary on the Deutero-Pauline epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews) analyses the social setting of Jesus-groups in Western Asia Minor in antiquity, also engaging contemporary anthropological studies.

The introductory chapter addresses the social and cultural setting of the Jesus-groups, highlighting the numerous bonds with their societies. These communities are thought to be mostly minority Israelite groups living in the cities of Western Asia Minor. The authors rightly emphasise that these communities were not isolated, but participated in the cultural, associative and religious life of the cities. The authors of the epistles, Paul's collaborators and legatees are understood as change agent successors who propose solutions to Israelites living in a non-Israelite society, preaching the redemption of Israel through Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, whom God has raised from the dead. The communities are expected to embrace this religious innovation and live accordingly. This innovation may not be considered a conversion properly speaking, i.e. as a transfer from one group to another, but as a change within the group itself.

The terminology borrowed from social sciences (ingroup/outgroup, change agent, group stability, innovation, alternate states of consciousness and alike) may appear complicated for the usual readers of commentaries, but the terms are explained and the commentary is easy to read. The authors also explain fundamental notions regarding the genre of these writings (the Hellenistic letter) and the structures of ancient societies: the *oikos*, the theme of household management and the household codes, the patronage system, slavery, the situation of widows, notions like *paideia*, salvation and savior. These topics are discussed in the final reading scenarios. The commentary also includes short explanations of basic religious notions (angels, apocalypticism, charism, grace, Kingdom of God, prayer, miracle, sacrifice, *eusebeia*) and fundamentals concerning the early history of Christian groups (Jesus-tradition, Gnosticism). These "reading scenarios" provide essential information about ancient societies and the early Jesus-groups and facilitate the understanding of

the text, making the commentary accessible to students and non-specialists. The text itself is explained in brief, but instructive textual notes.

The commentary is to introduce the readers to the world of these ancient writings, offering perspectives not otherwise discussed in theological commentaries. This approach will be appreciated by those interested in the social context of the early communities of Christ-believers.

The presentation of the addressees (the Jesus-groups) as communities that largely remain within the larger group of Israelites in Greco-Roman societies (against the widespread model of "conversion" from Judaism to "Christianity") is by and large convincing. Yet, such description may not be generalized for all epistles. Notably in the case of the Pastoral Epistles it is far from obvious that the author and the community would be of Jewish descent. Conversely (as shown by Jürgen Roloff, Michael Theobald and Hans-Ulrich Weidemann), the Pastoral Epistles reflect a departure from and an oblivion of Israel. The implied community is in not (chiefly) Jewish and the polemic against the opponents expresses the position of a non-Jewish author. This is not an inner-Jewish debate, as in the authentic letters of Paul.

Deriving the *ekklēsia* from the Septuagint is common but unconvincing in the light of the analyses of older and contemporary authors like Erik Peterson, Klaus Berger, Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, Matthias Klinghardt, who have made a compelling case for the connection between the tem *ekklēsia* and the Hellenistic *polis*.

The assumption that 1 Tim 2,9-15 would be anti-Gnostic is also common, yet unconvincing. In one of the reading scenarios the use of "Gnosticism" is also problematic, and the Gnosis would be more appropriate. The early Christian use of the term, the terminological difficulties and the changes in meaning (e.g. the change of perspective reflected by the Messina-definition) have been pointed out by Christoph Markschies in his *Gnosis* (2001, Engl. transl. 2003).

All things considered, the commentary offers a useful insight in the life and sociocultural context of early Jesus-groups, breaking with the clichés found in some theological commentaries which ignore these realities and promote anachronistic views of earliest Christian communities. Notably students will have a lot to learn from this writing.

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