

E. A. Judge, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* by E.A. Judge, ed. David Scholer (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2008).

Many books are scholarly. Others are helpful. It is the rarer book that teaches, helps and delights at the same time. The collection of essays, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* by E.A. Judge edited by David Scholer falls into the category of scholarship which is both useful and charming.

Professor Edwin Judge has been an important figure in the study of the first century for many decades. Now in this wonderful little volume, David M. Scholer (Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena California) has given historians and Bible readers access to a small collection of Judge's output spanning from 1960 to 1992.

If I may begin with the charming, let me give examples of Judge's gift for elegant expression. Here are just a few of those I enjoyed:

'The normal is never interesting, except to statisticians' (35).

'[Paul] has been too much at home in modern times for us to appreciate how acute his alienation from his own may have been' (74).

'The conceit [in NT studies] that whatever... [the NT] is about, is something not accessible to historical study' (80).

'[Paul] is... the historical source of the profound self-doubt that has divided the humanistic spirit ever since' (97)

'[Paul, t]he Abraham of the new covenant had left the old homeland. But what was his call, and where was he going?' (101).

'The New Testament does not often find a place in the historian's curriculum. It has been enshrined within an exquisite discipline of its own, created to meet the demands of a peculiar corpus of sources'(118).

'History walks a tightrope between the unique and the typical. If we explain everything by analogy, we deny to our forebears the individuality we take as a basic feature of our own humanity' (134).

I will now survey the eight essays. In the first, Judge demonstrates the value of a careful study of New Testament data in compiling a picture of first century Christian communities, and vice versa. He takes us through various 'social patterns' relevant to Christian groups. These include republican institutions, household communities, and unofficial associations. He then turns his attention to the social composition of Christian groups and the background to legal proceedings directed against Christians. He ends with some conclusions about the idea of social obligation, and particularly the

necessity of defining the context of 'ideas of social obligation' in the NT, before leaving theologians to the business of interpreting the ideas themselves (52f.) In sum, he finds Christians in stages 'acquiescent', 'defiant' and even 'militant' with respect to general social obligations in the world they inhabited.

On this journey, Judge makes explicit the goals of his personal historical project.

The New Testament is not an orderly statement of dogma, but a heterogenous collection of writings addressed to various occasions. While the affiliation of the ideas will generally govern their content, there will normally be a particular construction to be placed on them in relation to the particular situation. Neglect of this may result in imprecision or even error.

[T]he present study concentrates not on the writers, but on the readers... We possess the teaching of Jesus... as collated and formulated in Greek for the information of religious societies in Hellenistic circles. If it is to be understood properly, it must be understood from their point of view... (4-5.)

Judge's second essay is an eloquent argument for the need for careful mastery of the rhetorical art of the first century for the purpose of properly understanding 'Paul's struggle with rhetorically trained opponents for the support of his rhetorically fastidious converts' (68). In order to make his case, Judge considers Paul's status with respect to rhetoric (was he a mere 'layman?'), his possible employment of the 'grand style' of rhetoric, his own training/background, the place of rhetoric in antiquity and in the NT (a continuing issue in scholarship.) Judge then turns to Paul's contests with professional competitors, expressed in Paul's boasting passages. This is a wonderful study which shows Judge's own impressive understanding of rhetoric and its place in Paul's writings and world.

In the third essay, Judge wrestles with the enormous difficulty facing historians/Bible readers as they attempt to connect Paul to his own literary and historical context: 'The trouble with Paul has always been to put him in his place' (73.)

Judge is convinced that Paul cannot be understood properly without this project being attempted, yet the difficulties to be overcome are considerable. He suggests that, in the light of the considerable difficulties of other approaches, the most fertile place to start is with the evidence of the NT itself 'one of our most coherent sets of documents' (78.) He then proceeds to offer 'a few examples of ways in which the work of ancient historians in the more conventional sense might improve the position, as they see the NT as a focal point for their own studies' (82.) He then examines Roman citizenship and its entitlements, the history and life of Greek cities, class strata in those cities, Paul's educational attainments, his facility and quality of Greek, the conception of popular ethics and the relevance of the Cynic-Stoic diatribe, and others, with special reference to the contemporary debate over 2 Corinthians 10-13. Having elucidated numerous insights of his own, Judge nevertheless calls for further study of 'fashions in fine speech and self-display in the first century' whilst drawing specific attention to Paul's 'radical self-humiliation' (97). All the while, Judge demonstrates again and again the gems that can be mined by an historian with an excellent eye scanning the sources and scholarship before him.

In the fourth essay, Judge considers Paul as a radical critic of society. Judge notes that Paul had no apparent need, as a man of high Jewish and Roman status, to suffer the indignities that he did suffer in the course of his missions. So how should we interpret Paul's experience and program? Judge goes on to three major sections in his paper: First Paul's relation to Judaism, secondly his relation to Hellenism and thirdly Paul and his relation to women.

In the first of these, Judge wonders whether Paul is simply in strife because he lives as a reforming Jew. To the contrary, Judge shows that Paul acted in continuity with Jewish concerns and traditions, rather than clearly against them. Judge suggests that Paul's critique of Judaism does not seem to be a satisfying explanation of Paul's radical stance.

Next Judge considers Paul's engagement with Greek ideals. Here follows some classic Judge: 'There is no systematic exposition of [Paul's] views in relation to the Greek tradition [and this] is itself a mark of his total rejection of it... [T]he Greek philosophers are other-worldly ... [whereas] in my view there is no writer of antiquity who exposes himself so ruthlessly to direct human contact and reveals himself to others with such candour and directness as does St Paul' (102).

Paul does not use the same reference points as Hellenists, and yet he is a critic nevertheless. For example, Judge shows that Paul rejects Hellenism's commitment to self-cultivation. Judge also discusses Paul's rejection of Hellenism's enthusiasm for personal status. In the course of his treatment of these two radically counter-cultural themes in Paul, Judge provides us with rich insights into Paul's context, and thus into the nature of Paul's stance itself. This all makes for great fodder for preacher and Bible teacher alike.

In the final section of essay four, Judge offers his insights on the background to Paul's views about women. He gives a wonderful sketch of Greek views about the place of women, and of Paul's counterpoint, which both contradicts the devaluation of women, and at the same time plays a different game altogether. The essay ends with a moving account of Paul's own commitment to this radically different game: freedom from self interest. 'This was no Utopian ideal. He proved that by putting it to the purest test of integrity and practicality – in his own life' (115.)

In essay five Judge surveys the direction taken in the scholarship of the 20 years which followed his own seminal work (see essay one.) [It is somewhat curious that the references in the article are to only page numbers as originally published ('page 60' etc), without the guidance of a footnote cross-reference to the page on which the material appears in the current work (page 43.)] The point of his survey is to introduce an examination of method and in particular to challenge some assumptions operating in the field.

In the course of this he offers some observations about Christian society. For example, 'the pursuit of ideas, traditionally reserved to an élite, was to be broadly promoted in the community as to produce in the fourth century a type of common culture more socially pervasive than Hellenism had been... the movement is downward rather than upward. The number of those who think and argue about ethical questions is being expanded, but this does not come from below. It is the work of highly articulate people with social influence' (126.)

Judge identifies methodological issues in recent studies, and particularly those that naively transpose sociological analyses from modern times to the ancient world, assuming that the models produce helpful results. This leads Judge finally to his own exposition on the nature of the early church communities.

'The Christians in the last resort were seen, and saw themselves, as a kind of national community. Although they clearly lacked the ethnic or cultural identity of the Jews, it was their distinctive style of life which marked them out, and left them in potential conflict with the public community. There well may be no comparable phenomenon known to history, and it could therefore prove a fundamental error to attempt to explain primitive Christianity by sociological methods which work through analogy and presuppose the repetitiveness of human behaviour' (131.)

Judge concludes as he often does in these pieces, with a call to further work before securing 'at last a history of the New Testament in its times. By that I mean a history that will do justice to the central figures and ideas of the New Testament by appraising them in a full comparison with the relevant ideas and institutions of their day' (135.)

Judge's sixth essay begins with his familiar assertion that previous views as to the low rank and status of Christians had been revised: 'there was evidence that not all early Christians were so low' (140.) He goes on to illustrate the value, in plotting the character of society in the first century, of the collection of papyri established at Judge's Macquarie University in Sydney. The essay concludes with a frown at sociological theory, 'sociological theory may have its explanatory uses, provided it survives the discipline of documented facts. But ancient history has no particular need to look to other epochs for fresh sources of understanding' (156) and a recommitment to the value of studying the papyri. 'In the vivid details of the papyrus documents we have an authentic point of contact with the times, through which we can progressively sharpen our focus on them' (156.)

Essay seven is a study of the relation of the first Christians and their community to property, and in particular Paul's attitude to existing social institutions like rank and status. Judge begins by rehearsing the Marxist analysis of religion in assessing history in economic terms. He points out that the communal property of the early church posed a dilemma for the early Marxists. If religion is the 'opium for the people', deployed by property owners to quieten the poor so that they do not seize property from those that have it, why did the early church resort to the religious 'illusion'? As proto communists, they enjoyed a kind of common property and supposedly had no need to be quietened.

In his introduction, Judge examines to the scholarship of Ste Croix which resolves this dilemma by distinguishing Jesus and Paul, seeing the latter as the real problem. According to Croix Paul wrote virtually 'a blank cheque' for 'the powers that be' (158). Judge moves from here to an analysis of Paul's true attitude to status and rank, something very different to what Ste Croix or Marx imagine. The project of Paul and the early church was in fact disruption - nothing like that of Marx's imagined role for religion. Judge notes the role of classical religion. "The purpose of classical religion was to secure what was already there against just such a [Pauline/Christian] upheaval" (160). Yet on the other hand, Paul does see the ruling authorities as having a legitimate responsibility to exercise authority. "Paul must therefore be set firmly in opposition to Marx in that he does not hold the formal structure of society in his day to be systematically oppressive and hostile to man's best hopes, and does not in any way suggest or imply that its violent overthrow could as a matter of principle be in the positive interest of mankind or part of a believer's duty to God" (164).

This is the springboard for Judge to consider issues directly relevant to a reading of the Pauline letters to Corinth. "My proposition is that while accepting rank [Paul] repudiates the status conventions which permitted people to exploit the system to private advantage" (page 165). Judge considers here first, Paul's failure to impress the Corinthians as an orator. "As a convert to the persecuted Jesus... Paul consciously sought the reversal of his own socio-cultural expectations... It was a cultural revolution which still carries us all in its wake - if only in the convention of self-deprecation" (166).

The second issue Judge considers is Paul's attitude to money - he refused the Corinthians' financial aid, preferring to support himself with his own labour. Here Judge exposes just how unintelligible and offensive this was to the cultural understanding of patronage accepted by his addressees.

On the other hand, it is not all demolition. Paul is not just a wrecker, but a builder. The final section of Judge's paper examines the new structures Paul built - even using the word build or 'edify', and appealing to believers to be involved in his project. With spiritual resources available to all Christians,

Paul steers the church towards reconstructing society on a healthy and loving basis: “an historical innovation of the first order. It may perhaps be called the first structural approach to human relations” (174).

In the eighth and final essay, Judge offers background on an issue that is particularly and directly relevant to Christian disciples. As a whole, he addresses the issue of Paul as moral exemplar, and in particular as informed by archaeology: the inscriptions at Ephesus. Illustrations and insights to aid a Bible teacher or student abound. Judge’s second section goes very much to the heart of Christian life. Here he examines what it means in the ancient world to be a ‘follower’ of Jesus or ‘imitator’ of Paul (note “The words are not interchangeable” (181).

The book contains a valuable set of indices, including an index of Biblical references.

A book for every Pauline teacher or student.

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