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Social distinctives of the Christians in the first century: pivotal essays by E.A. Judge

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I commend Fortress Press for this *Paul in Critical Context* series for at least two reasons: Neil Elliott's *The Arrogance of Nations* and Davina Lopez's *Apostle to the Conquered*.

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Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays

E. A. Judge, ed. David M. Scholer.
Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008.
xx and 227 pages, \$28.25 Softcover

This book appears just as Robert Jewett's long-awaited comprehensive socio-rhetorical commentary on Romans becomes available through Fortress Press at a cool \$108.00 (Canadian). This little collection of the essays of E.A. Judge makes a very good (and much cheaper) introduction to the important and helpful results of socio-rhetorical research on the New Testament. As Scholer provides only a minimal placement of Judge's work in the field by offering a sampling bibliography of more recent works, readers are very quickly immersed in the beginning papers and the development of lines of inquiry and methodological concerns of this discipline. Whereas Jewett attempts to take us into the inner workings of the early Christian movement, Judge is trying to sharpen the understanding of the background upon which the phenomenon, in his view, must be viewed in order to arrive at more accurate understandings of the New Testament contents.

Particularly he is concerned with the social ethics of the early Christians. Acknowledging the influence of the idea of the imminent end and the centrality of belief in Christ to the way the New Testament writers grapple with social obligations in the Christian groups, Judge firmly commits himself to the assumption that the interpretation of the New Testament is the history of its interpretation. He has further an assumption of equivocity: "It may be asserted that ideas are never satisfactorily explained merely by discovering their

philosophical connections. They must be pinned down in relation to the particular circumstances in which they were expressed. The meaning is fixed at this point, and cannot be ascertained until it [those particular circumstances] is identified.” (9) Though the surplus of meaning in the New Testament text (as in any text) belies this attempt to establish socio-rhetorical research as the hermeneutical absolute, it does provide the motive power for some very useful thinking and very detailed research in the essays which follow. There is simply no way to remove the final role of faith affirmations from the purview of New Testament interpretation. This is as true of social ethics as of any other arena of Christian thought.

The best feature of this book is the way Scholer has ordered the selection of essays he presents. They are all, from “The Social Patterns of the Christian Groups in the First Century” (the seminal work standing near the origins of the discipline), through the three papers on Paul’s relation to classical society (“Paul’s Boasting in Relation to Contemporary Professional Practice,” “St. Paul and Classical Society,” and “St. Paul as a Radical Critic of Society”) carefully researched against the classical milieu of the republican cities and colonies of the Roman Empire through which Paul moved and preached. Judge repeatedly attacks the notion that the early Christian movement was pitched as an appeal to the poorest of society; he also challenges the early Jewishness of the movement. Not surprising from such a scholar of the classical age, Judge sets Paul’s legal battles, rhetorical methods, and ethical concerns about the role of women, ethnic relations, and order in society against the Hellenistic background. Using this method, Judge contributes a great deal to the attempt to isolate Paul’s distinctiveness from the Cynics, the Stoics, the requirements of religiosity, the teachers of the Torah and, most importantly, from the social expectations of the ordinary person as we view him or her in the snapshots of life found in the classical literature, and especially in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. This is a fascinating read, with the sections on how Paul’s thought differs from his Hellenistic milieu on the abandonment of self and status.

Along the way Judge establishes a clear hierarchy of thought: despite his earlier attempt to defer genuinely “theological” conclusions deriving from his work to “others more qualified” (the results of socio-rhetorical research into the New Testament are only prolegomena, he says), Judge clearly proceeds from a theological

starting point and moves via christology to anthropology. This he believes is also Paul's hierarchy of thought:

As a Hebrew his [Paul's] thinking simply did not begin with man (sic) at all. And in that sense it is radically anti-humanist. He simply does not concede that the condition of man can be explained by the analysis of man in himself. And by extension the analysis of social relations in themselves forms no part of his understanding of human society ... he measures himself and others by direct reference to the will of God revealed in Christ...Its validity had been tested profoundly in his own experience and that of his colleagues and followers Even when he generalizes on social issues ... it is always with reference to Christ as the starting-point, and to the behaviour of the particular individuals he is writing to as the end-point. (102)

It is interesting to see how the field Judge was ploughing began to move in certain directions from the first turnings of its rich soils. In his methodological contribution to the discourse, Judge catches up with the shame-honour focus by setting the questions in the context of his own findings about the social status of the early Christians. The challenges he raises in "Rank and Status in the World of Caesars and St. Paul," from research into the papyrological evidence of the first century are still being met by works like Jewett's commentary on Romans.

Bearing in mind the weaknesses of not defining "theology" (for a discussion of the various meanings of this word in "theological" work see David Kelsey's *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*) and ignoring the significance of the surplus of meaning in the text, this book is a valuable introduction to the discipline of socio-rhetorical research into the New Testament works of Paul, and through the bibliographies, extensive footnotes, and fascinating contents of the papers themselves, offers much food for thought in both the teaching and proclamation tasks of the ministry of the Word. And the cover art is great too!

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