

Exploring the New Testament World. By Albert A. Bell, Jr. Nashville; Nelson, 1998, xiv + 322 pp., \$14.99.*

The present survey of relevant backgrounds for the study of the NT has been written by a professor of classics and history at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Following a rather idiosyncratic introduction, there are chapters on Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, whereby the latter is given significantly more attention, including chapters on politics and history, law, religion, philosophy, structures of society, morality and personal relations, and time, distance and travel. While amassing much helpful material, the work has several weaknesses that limit its usefulness.

To begin with, the book suffers from a lack of focus, having been written for the elusive "general reader" (so B. Metzger in his foreword, p. ix). In Bell's case, this may be the motivated college student, which would account for the colloquial tone of the author's introductions and the frequent personal, down-to-earth examples in the text. At the same time, Bell includes extensive, up-to-date subject bibliographies at the end of every chapter that make his work valuable also for the more serious student (I found this to be the most outstanding feature of the book).

Also, the treatment of various areas of background is grossly imbalanced. As mentioned, only one chapter is devoted to Judaism (37 pp.), while the bulk of the book (or seven out of ten chapters) deals with the Greco-Roman world (225 pp.). This may reflect more the author's area of expertise than a conscious presupposition concerning the preeminence of a Greco-Roman over against a Jewish background for the NT. Nevertheless, it would have been helpful to acknowledge this focus at some point in the volume as well as in the title of the book.

Moreover, the work is sketchy at places. To give but one example, the door is left open that the Pastorals "may have been written by someone other than Paul but circulated under the apostle's name." As the author informs us, "In antiquity people sometimes put the names of famous persons in their works to gain credibility. Such a tactic was considered a tribute of respect rather than forgery" (p. 150, n. 7). No further discussion or evidence is provided. But this cursory treatment of an issue with far-reaching implications hardly qualifies as serious scholarship.

For the above reasons, I recommend that this book be used with caution and as a supplement to more reliable guides to the NT world. Owing to its user-friendly features (including quotes in sidebars and the above-mentioned subject bibliographies) and its non-threatening way of presentation, college teachers may consider Bell's work as a text, perhaps together with B. Metzger's collection of primary source documents of the NT. As far as level of scholarship and even-handedness is concerned, however, Bell's book does not rival E. Ferguson's *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*.

Andreas J. Köstenberger
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

*This review first appeared in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 754 and is posted with permission.