

BOOK REVIEW

Pilch, John J., *A Cultural Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). xii + 307 pp. Pbk. \$26.00 USD.

This volume is a collection of Pilch's articles previously published from 1998–2006 in *The Bible Today* (Liturgical Press). The series of articles is arranged under eight culturally-themed topics: The Cosmos, The Earth, Persons, Family, Language, Human Consciousness, God and the Spirit World and Entertainment. Each themed topic has between five and nine shorter essays that expound on the theme, each of which is easily readable in fifteen minutes or less. It is clear that these essays were not written with the intention that they comprise a single work. It is also clear that their original home was a magazine. Some of the articles feel 'forced' under or do not fit at all into their themes (e.g. 'The Bawdy Bible' under the chapter on Entertainment). The articles also have a certain amount of 'wow' factor in their style, something that is often found in magazine articles. Though there is nothing inherently wrong with this style and arrangement, and many scholars reprint previously published articles in collections, this volume is not at all what the title of the book suggests. Instead of *A Cultural Handbook to the Bible*, which implies comprehensiveness, what the reader finds instead are *Several Interesting Thoughts on Biblical Life and Times*. Though not a catchy title, this is a more accurate descriptor of its contents. Those who are looking for a more conventional introductory 'handbook' reference will be sorely disappointed.

Chapter 1 consists of five articles: Hell, Heaven, Earth, Imaginary Mountains in Matthew and A New Sky and a New Earth. The first three topics are framed with the idea that the ancient shamans saw the world as a giant, cosmic 'tree of life' (p. 1, though this is not to be confused with the Tree of Life in Genesis 2). Pilch notes that in most cultures the roots of the 'tree' represent the realm of death, the branches of the tree represent the sky, which is the place where God or the gods live, and the trunk of the tree represents reality or the place where people live.

Pilch does not limit this idea of shamans to the Ancient Near Eastern cultures for comparison. This presents a potential for confusion and the problems inherent in this methodology will be briefly noted in discussion of chapter 2.

Another common difficulty in this volume is his insistence on apparent 'literal' meanings of certain Greek or Hebrew words. When discussing 'heaven', Pilch suggests that the Greek word 'literally means "sky"' (p. 7). He uses this distinction to strip away theological 'baggage' from the term 'heaven'. In doing so, he adds some 'literalistic baggage' to the term, as he fails to consider that this Greek word *can* indeed have legitimate theological connotations based on context of usage, and such ideas are not impositions on what is 'actually meant'. Such attempts at invoking the literal meaning of biblical language are common in this collection and often create unnecessary and misleading linguistic distinctions (see also pp. 65-66).

In Chapter 2, Pilch explores 'The Earth'. He considers desert and wilderness, caves, swamps, snakes, dragons and mirrors, and glass. He connects each of these with different cultures that use similar imagery and demonstrates how he sees the biblical text fitting in with these wider ideas. Pilch impresses upon his readers that the Bible is a 'high context' document, where the writer assumes that the readers possess intimate knowledge of the culture being discussed, and thus does not bother to explain details that were common knowledge to the first readers. While this is a point well taken, it is also here that Pilch's book is at its weakest. By failing to stick with the biblical culture under consideration, Pilch creates confusion for his readers. He notes, for example, that snakes were both symbols of life and death in various world cultures and asserts that this was also true in Israelite and Greco-Roman Jewish culture. His example of snakes 'giving' life in that Israelite culture is that of the bronze serpent that Moses makes to restore health to those bitten by poisonous snakes (p. 45). Since the snakes in this account initially cause death, Pilch's 'life-giving' cultural connection seems questionable. Adding to the confusion, in a subsequent essay, Pilch asserts that dragons are synonymous with snakes and notes that many world cultures view dragons as wise and good creatures. In contrast, he notes that in the Middle East both dragons and snakes are generally seen as 'evil and harmful' (pp. 47-48).

The first essay leaves the reader thinking that snakes are a life-giving creature in the culture in question, while the next suggests the opposite.

This is confusing and misleading, especially for those who do not immediately read both essays. Had the other world cultures been left out of the discussion, the articles would have been clearer. This mixing of cultures is also a problem on pp. 83-87 and 247-52. Though an accepted practice in some circles, this method has great potential to find parallels where none actually exist. And, unfortunately, the articles are so short that they cannot provide the basic methodological theory that is needed for readers to better judge for themselves which conclusions are plausible. Somewhat related to this mixing of world cultures, Pilch often does not differentiate between the cultures of the Old and New Testaments, and the reader is left with the false impression that the two are interchangeable. This is demonstrated in his short study on various Hebrew words for 'desert' or 'wilderness' and subsequent discussion of the use of deserts in the New Testament without concern for the Greek renderings of the idea of wilderness or desert (pp. 29-32).

Chapter 3 focuses on Persons. Some of the best articles in this section are the third through fifth, which focus on a particular cultural idea and explain its impact on the interpretation of a specific biblical text. For example, the third essay entitled, "Visiting Strangers" and "Resident Aliens" (pp. 68-72), considers the idea of 'strangers' and 'aliens' in connection with the social situation in 1 Peter. Pilch discusses the concepts of family and belonging in the ancient Mediterranean world to help contextualize the letter for the reader. In contrast, in essays 7-9 (Names, Photina the Samaritan woman and Naming the Nameless), he speaks less of biblical culture and more about how the church has interpreted and embellished biblical personages and their names over the years. This is less biblical culture than it is history of interpretation.

Chapter 4 deals with the topic of Family. Its strength is that it brings ideas like individualist and collectivist societies and honour and shame to the forefront of the reader's attention. Pilch demonstrates well that not all cultures interpret concepts like virginity, marriage, family, adultery, rape and death in the same way, and this can pose difficulties for interpretation. For example, the Lesu, a Melanesian people, feel that extra-marital sexual relations are normal and expected (p. 122). The biblical texts could be very confusing to someone who holds this type of worldview. Also, Pilch prompts his readers to consider how a biblical text discussing adultery could or should be applied in cultures that do not recognize extra-marital sexual relations as a punishable infidelity.

Chapter 5 deals with language and literacy. Particularly interesting are the sections on cursing, giving thanks and the evil eye that demonstrate clearly the difference between North American and Mediterranean thought. For example, cursing or oath-swearing is very different in western society, and so the impact of curses in the text is somewhat lost on the uninformed reader (see p. 163). The section about giving thanks or lack thereof brings out important distinctions, such as the never-ending expectation of reciprocity where a 'thank-you' would be considered an 'end' to this expectation and actually rather rude (pp. 168-69).

What is of greatest concern in this section and throughout the book is the paucity of references. While there are a handful of in-text citations throughout, many times bold or controversial statements have no reference or refer only to Pilch's own previous work. An example of this is when Pilch prefaces a conclusion with the assertion, 'Since no one whispers in this culture...' (p. 162; see also comments about peasants on p. 234 or those concerning ancient sound wave recovery on pp. 266-67). No one *ever* whispers? This seems unlikely. The lack of reference or further explanation makes it difficult for readers to know where to investigate further this somewhat odd statement.

Chapter 6 deals with human consciousness and is among the most frustrating chapters of the book. It deals with various aspects of what Pilch labels 'Altered States of Consciousness'. This kind of analysis makes the most sense when Pilch discusses events that are clearly depicted as dreams, visions or trances, but it becomes problematic when Pilch uses it to analyze what is happening in the accounts of Jesus walking on water or the resurrection appearances. When discussing these two accounts, Pilch never addresses the fact that neither is presented as being viewed in a dream-like state and that there are witnesses to these events who were all present at the same time. This changes how the author intended the text to be understood, something that Pilch seems to fail to take into account. The sections in this chapter are also very repetitive and rely heavily on the work of anthropologist Felicitas Goodman. Greater variety of sources would strengthen his arguments.

Chapter 7 focuses on God and the spirit world. This section discusses the idea of God in Middle Eastern culture and the notion of God as a patron whose people pay him honour. He also takes the opportunity to remind readers that Jesus is not quite the nice, polite, 'western' citizen that we often make him out to be. Understanding the important

concepts of challenge-riposte and honour helps westerners more easily explain Jesus' practices of evading questions and insulting his opponents (p. 244). While not polite to us, in his own time and culture, these things demonstrate that Jesus was a skilled debater and a man worthy of honour.

Chapter 8 discusses entertainment in the ancient world. Here Pilch examines ancient music and games and related biblical passages. Though he has some good insights to offer on this topic, parts of it show potential confusion in terminology. For example, he states, 'The singing in the book of Revelation must have been in unison since the visionary heard, understood, and recorded the texts he heard' (p. 258). This assumption is unnecessary, since neither the non-unison singing of simple harmony nor the more complex interaction of contrapuntal lines necessitates difficulty in understanding a sung text. In spite of this discrepancy, Pilch effectively demonstrates that biblical music and musical instruments should not be understood from a modern perspective. Both have evolved in the past millennia.

Though the term 'handbook' is misplaced in the title of this book, it is interesting to read and has some good pieces of basic cultural information for the discerning reader. The book does not lend itself well to being an authority for scholarly research, though it may be useful as a companion to a more comprehensive text or as discussion starter for classrooms. As references are sparse, those who wish to delve into the details of Pilch's topics will have to mine the recommended readings sections at the end of each chapter on their own. Also worth noting is that the book should not be read through cover-to-cover. Pilch instead suggests that a reader should turn to the table of contents and read on the topic or topics that interest them. This would be a better choice, as there is certainly no sustained thesis in the work that requires it to be read in any particular order. Also, those who read the book straight through will find much basic information repeated in a number of the articles. This is necessary for independent articles and useful in a quick-reference guide, but makes for irritating repetition when read front to back.

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