

## Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament

By J. Julius Scott Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 416 pp., (paperback).

The author holds that two seminal events at the close of the Old Testament significantly influenced Judaism from what we know of it strictly from the Old Testament: the destruction of Solomon's Temple resulting in the Babylonian captivity and the later attempt to rebuild the Temple; and the spread of Hellenism under the influence of Alexander the Great and the Seleucid rulers which followed. The main thesis of the book is that the reader of the New Testament will better appreciate the Judaism of Jesus' day, at the time of the New Testament, by having an understanding of these influences upon intertestamental Judaism.

*Christians visit [Intertestamental Judaism] to grasp more fully the spiritual roots from which we sprang, but also the radical difference of what has been built upon the foundation of Jesus the Messiah. We understand more, believe more firmly, and function better as we consciously grasp the nature of and appreciate the roots of Christianity in the customs and controversies of Intertestamental Judaism (p. 356).*

This is especially true when attempting to distinguish those things within Judaism which Jesus upheld (e.g., Old Testament law) vs. those which he was strongly critical of (e.g., the tradition of the elders, “fencing” the Torah, beliefs of the Sadducees).

The book is particularly helpful in gaining an understanding of the expectations, practices, and diversity within Judaism into which Jesus was born. Some of the scenes in the New Testament where we find Jews expressing beliefs or controversies which there is little basis for in the Old Testament become clearer when we know more about what transpired between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New.

The book surveys a variety of literature between the Testaments to provide development and changes which influenced the institutions, sects, parties, and common life of the Jews. One of the tensions within the text is the “balancing act” which the author strives to maintain in balancing extra-Biblical sources with Biblical revelation. In attempting to explain what some New Testament Jews believed, he necessarily must draw upon both Biblical and extra-Biblical materials. In some places, the teaching of these sources is at odds and at other places they are in agreement. This, then, is one of the caveats of the book for the less familiar new Christian: a tendency to treat both Biblical and extra-Biblical material in a way which may blur the distinction between the two. Although the author upholds the inspiration of the former, an undiscerning or inexperienced reader could be led toward a focus on the uninspired writings rather than on the Biblical text.

The text is a valuable contribution for the mature, discerning reader—I wound up taking extensive notes on a wide assortment of information which shed greater light on many aspects of the New Testament.

Two minor concerns bear mentioning.

The first concern is a consistent implication by the author that the straight-forward

reading and close study of details within apocalyptic passages is ill-advised and represents a failure to appreciate the genre and intent of the author:

*Another unwarranted approach that some Christians take in reading apocalyptic literature is to be preoccupied with questions and issues about which the writers, including New Testament writers, show little concern. We have in mind here chronological schemes and precise identification of people, events, and institutions (p. 184).*

While we agree there is much abuse in the interpretation (and sensationalism) of apocalyptic passages, we disagree with the author concerning the value of studying the details using normative interpretation (hermeneutics). It is our view that God intends to reveal specifics concerning chronological schemes and also provides ample information to correlated passages in order to closely identify certain individuals (their character and actions, if not their precise identification) as well as events. So here we see the typical bias against a dispensational interpretation where we refuse to spiritualize away details within apocalyptic passages.

A second concern is the author's covenant theology which leads him to blur the Biblical distinctions between the covenants (plural, Rom. 9:4). For example, the Mosaic covenant—given at Sinai to Israel and based on a different sign (the Sabbath) than the Abrahamic covenant (signified by circumcision) is considered merely as an extension of the Abrahamic covenant

*The Abrahamic covenant (“I will . . . be God to you and to your offspring” - Gen. 17:7) was reaffirmed through Moses at the time of the exodus and then echoed throughout the Old Testament. Torah is inseparably bound to this covenant (p. 273).*

This “single covenant” view is such a strongly-governing interpretive influence on the author that he is unable to admit what the Bible itself makes clear: that the Mosaic Covenant has come to an *end* and that the new covenant is truly *new*:

*In the New Testament the Last Supper is a ceremony **renewing the covenant**. Jesus pronounces, “This is my blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1Cor. 11:25). Some manuscripts of Matthew and Mark join Luke and 1 Corinthians in including the word “new” to modify “covenant.”*

*The stumbling block was [Jesus'] own person and claims—that God was at work and made himself known in Jesus, that **the covenant was made new**, that both the Law and the Prophets were fulfilled (p. 354).*

Notice the author maintains that the New Covenant is a “renewal” of “the” covenant—whereas the Bible maintains that one of the covenants—the Old (Mosaic) Covenant was “broken” and is “passing away” (Jer. 31:32; Heb. 7:22; 8:5-13; 10:9). Thus the New

Covenant is not a renewal of any Old Testament Covenant but truly *new* (although based upon promises rooted in the Abrahamic—Rom. 11). If this bias is kept in mind, there is much of value here for the seasoned student of the New Testament.

Reviewed by Tony Garland of [www.SpiritAndTruth.org](http://www.SpiritAndTruth.org).