

REVIEW

Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus. By JODI MAGNESS. Pp. xv + 335. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN 978 0 8028 6558 8. Paper \$25/£16.99.

THE subtitle, 'Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus', does not really reflect the contents of Jodi Magness's book, which deals with a relatively small selection of daily life issues only, mostly concerning purity, examined on the basis of Qumran literature, Qumran archaeology, and later rabbinic texts, including the Babylonian Talmud and medieval Midrashim. The author reflects on those issues of daily life which arise from her own excavation work rather than providing a broad and critical overview of ancient Jewish everyday life, as is now available in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (ed. C. Hezser, Oxford: OUP, 2010). That said, the book contains some interesting observations in areas that have sometimes been neglected by scholars whose work focuses on texts.

Almost all of the twelve chapters of the book address subjects related to purity and pollution: purifying the body and hands, impure creatures, the material from which household vessels were made, dining customs, dirt, spit, and toilet habits, tombs and burials. The author's goal is to detect the 'Jewish "footprints"', that is, evidence of practices and observances that distinguished Jews from non-Jews or 'created sectarian divisions' (p. 2), noticeable in the material and literary evidence. She assumes that the observance of biblical purity laws, in particular, would have distinguished Jews from non-Jews and adherents of one 'sect' from another.

The problem with this approach is its circularity: the assumption that Jews were universally observant of these laws leads to their identification in the material evidence. This is already noticeable in the case of the alleged ubiquity of 'ritual immersion baths (*miqva'ot*): certain structures are identified as *miqva'ot* on the assumption that immersion was a commonly observed practice amongst Jews in the late Second Temple period. Without this assumption, each individual structure would have to be understood within its own context and a variety of uses might be assumed. This literal understanding of biblical prescriptions therefore leads to a rather simplistic interpretation of a rather

varied set of material remains. On the basis of this identification, widespread Jewish purity observance is maintained and the argumentative circle closed: 'The widespread distribution of miqva'ot attests to the observance of purity laws among various sectors of the population . . .' (p. 16). Pools found in priestly contexts in Jerusalem need to be distinguished from cavities found in agricultural and rural contexts and private from public facilities. Controversy amongst scholars about the identification of these finds is not adequately reflected here, perhaps because the book is written for a general audience.

The problem with the author's use of texts is that they are usually taken literally as historical evidence of the practices and events they describe. This applies to New Testament texts as much as to rabbinic texts. References to Pharisaic practices in the gospels are used as if they were historical records, not taking the tradents' and gospel editor's formulation of these narratives and disputes into account. Since we do not possess any writings by the Pharisees themselves, all evidence about their purity practices is second- or third-hand evidence that is coloured by the respective tradents' own concerns and ideologies. Similarly problematic are the direct connections that are drawn between archaeological records and rabbinic prescriptions. Rabbinic purity rules in the Mishnah are used to explain the otherwise mute archaeological evidence. Such conclusions are not only based on the assumption that a direct connection existed between pre-70 Pharisees and post-70 rabbis; they also presuppose that theoretical prescriptions and discussions were widely practised by Pharisees' and rabbis' contemporaries. Without these assumptions certain 'water basins in Jerusalem' would not be immediately identifiable as 'miqva'ot for hand immersion' (p. 20), the washing of hands before 'the consumption of food and drink' (*ibid.*). Similarly, the use of stone vessels in pre-70 Jerusalem is explained on the basis of later rabbinic regulations: 'Stone vessels appear to have become popular because many Jews considered stone insusceptible to impurity' (p. 72), which is supported by reference to various Mishnah and Tosefta passages.

Like many of the other issues discussed here, the focus of the chapter on dining customs is on the Qumran Essene community. Obviously, these communal dining practices cannot be considered representative of dining amongst all Jews 'in the time of Jesus'. The same applies to other Qumran practices such as Sabbath observance, fasting, sharing of possessions, bathing, and toilet habits. The examples from Qumran cannot be used as evidence of 'Jewish daily life' in general. Such a study would

have to be based on a critical examination of a much broader body of archaeological and literary material, a task which can be achieved by an interdisciplinary group of experts in the respective literatures and material records only.

The present study is valuable as an investigation of daily life at Qumran, with a focus on the particular purity concerns of that group. As a second step, the evidence of these practices amongst Essenes should be compared with later Christian and rabbinic sources which thematize these issues. Once the limits of the respective sources have been recognized, chronological developments and variations in the purity practices of the various ancient Jewish social and religious groups can be traced.

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