

volumes. For the reception of the OT in Early Judaism one could also refer to J. J. Collins, D. C. Harlow (eds.), *The Eerdmans dictionary of early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010).

Christoph Stenschke, Forum Wiedenest, Bergneustadt, Germany *and* Department of Ancient and Biblical Studies, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Pretoria, 0003, Republic of South Africa.

E-mail: Stenschke@wiedenest.de

A cultural handbook to the Bible, by John J. Pilch, Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012. Xii + 307 pp., paperback. 26 USD. ISBN 978-0-8028-6720-9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/3683>

John Pilch's acclaimed *Cultural dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press) appeared in 1999. It consisted of bimonthly articles which he wrote under the heading "A window into the biblical world" between 1993 and 1999 for the journal *The Bible Today* (https://www.litpress.org/Subscriptions/Journals/bible_today.html), which was also published by Liturgical Press.

In the present volume, which is a sequel to the first book, Pilch collected the articles published in the same journal from 1998 to 2006 and arranged them thematically under eight headings.

A special feature of the volume is that each article applies insights from the social sciences to the understanding of the biblical world and to the interpretation of biblical passages, topics, and themes (xif.). Regarding his aim, Pilch writes: "With this book, readers should be able to become acquainted with social-scientific sources and methods, and also be able to see how biblical scholars utilizing these resources are able to produce fresh, Middle Eastern, culturally plausible interpretations of that Middle Eastern document known as the Bible" (xii). The volume would have profited from a concise introduction to the strengths and weaknesses of this methodological approach and to its presuppositions.

Each of the eight sections opens with a very short introduction. The sections are: “The Cosmos” (1–26; hell, heaven, earth, imaginary mountains in Matthew and the biblical vision of a new sky and a new earth; “A close examination of these and related concepts as they appear in the Bible will give readers a fresh appreciation of how our ancestors in the faith understood their cosmos, and what they had in mind when they used these terms”, 1); “Earth” (27–57; desert and wilderness, caves, swamps, snakes, dragons, mirrors and glass; Pilch examines aspects of the earth in which the biblical authors lived; “While these may seem like self-evident concepts, our reflections will show how the biblical authors attached a wide array of symbolic as well as literary meanings to these simple realities”, 27) and “Persons” (59–104; citizen, “people” are not a nation, “visiting strangers” and “resident aliens” – insights from 1 Peter, Jesus and the Samaritans, biblical persons as individuals or stereotypes?, status by gender and age, the significance of names, Photina, the Samaritan woman as she is called in the Orthodox tradition, the attempts and attraction of naming the nameless persons in the Bible in its history of reception). Pilch emphasises that members of individualistic cultures

feel so strongly embedded in their group that they do not want to stand out as individuals. The Bible is all about collectivistic individuals, which explains the importance of groups, the frequency of stereotyping by group, and the lack of names or their unreliable facticity when a name is reported. We also reflect upon concepts such as Citizen, nation, visiting strangers, resident aliens, and the like, which are quite familiar in our experience but are anachronistic labels when applied to the ancient Middle Eastern world (59).

Other sections are “Family” (105–146; virgin, marriage, family, adultery, rape, noble death, a dying person’s final words which strive to strengthen and sustain loyalty to the group and to one another; Pilch emphasises that knowledge of family and family issues is culturally specific: “All cultures recognise the family as a basic social institution, but each culture has a peculiar understanding of family. A father and mother are basic to every family because they are involved in procreation, in bringing

children to the world. However, cultures differ in their understanding of father and mother and children”, 105); “Language” (147–182; “How Do You Read?”, the Decalogue, the art of insult, the power of the curse, the return of the healed Samaritan to thank Jesus, non-verbal communication such as the different functions of human touch and the different messages which it sends out in different cultures and casting the “evil eye”; Pilch observes that “Western readers of the Bible quite likely never reflect on the fact that literacy in the ancient world may have been as low as two percent of the population. Still, the predominantly oral culture managed remarkably well”, 147); “Human Consciousness” (183–226; focusing on biblical reports which are best understood as experiences in alternate state of consciousness, i.e., dreams, experiences of seeing God, Jesus walking on the sea, resurrection appearances, journeys to the sky, Paul’s call to be an Apostle, Paul the Apostle in cultural context, “dark night” as a metaphor for the perceived absences of God; on the subject of this section see also Pilch’s collection of essays *Flights of the Soul: Visions, Heavenly Journeys, and Peak Experiences in the Biblical World*; Grand Rapids, Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2011 and Maximilian Benz, *Gesicht und Schrift: Die Erzählung von Jenseitsreisen in Antike und Mittelalter, Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte* 78; Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2013), and “God and the Spirit World” (227–252; God in Middle Eastern perspective, God in the Parable of the Talents/Pounds, God and lying spirits, the Middle Eastern Jesus and spirits as other-than-human persons). Pilch notes that everything that human beings can know and say about God is rooted in human experience. An often-neglected aspect of human experiences is that it is culturally specific. Therefore, it is necessary to ask how the culture of the biblical authors coloured the way in which they understood God, Jesus, and the world of the spirits.

A final section addresses “Entertainment” (253–283), namely the sound of the flute, singing in one voice, “After they had sung a hymn” (Mk 14:26), Solomon’s song as the best of all, games, amusement, and sports, the use of euphemisms and in other instances vocabulary and phrases that seem coarse in our ears. At the end of this section, Pilch describes and examines a number of educational films based on

anthropological research and fieldwork that illuminate the world of the Bible and which he has employed in teaching (283–288). Examples are *Family Matters: The Role of the Family in the Middle East* or *Kypseli: Men and Women Apart – A Divided Reality*. However, also a number of “recreational” films strive to present the historical and cultural circumstances of their subject with accuracy, examples are Prizzi’s *Honour*, *The Godfather*, *The Grandfather (El Abuelo)*, and *Wedding in Galilee*. Pilch notes that, “At the very least, these films help non-Mediterranean people to momentarily put aside their own cultural baggage in order to begin to appreciate another culture, on its own terms” (288). The volume closes with an index of authors, of subjects, and of Scripture and other Ancient Literature. Each section closes with suggestions for further reading which primarily list the social-sciences sources which Pilch consulted and secondary biblical resources which have applied these social-science insights to select passages or whole books of the Bible.

While not replacing a traditional Bible dictionary, the volume offers many interesting and fresh insights into the world of the Bible and its reflection in biblical texts. The volume is clearly written and suitable for general readers and undergraduate students, but also offers insights for scholars. At the very least it drives home in a charming and convincing way the recognition that today’s readers come to the Bible with the presuppositions of their own cultures (be they African or Western), which must not simply be assumed or read back into biblical texts. Perhaps the challenge is even greater when the cultural differences are far more subtle and not as great as they are for the North American readers whom Pilch has in mind.

The volume is heavily indebted to cultural anthropology and the social sciences. With all the merits of this approach, it also needs to be noted that the approach has been criticised and – at the very least – needs to be supplemented by traditional historical approaches (for a recent solid presentation and succinct criticism of cultural anthropology and social sciences approaches see Kunio Nojima, *Ehre und Schande in Kulturanthropologie und biblischer Theologie*, Acro Wissenschaft; Wuppertal, Wien: Arco, 2011, 15–60, 105–142). There are a number of serious challenges to the presupposition of cultural continuity in the Mediterranean world between antiquity