

**Jodi Magness**

**Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus**

Review by Rev. Bruce Incze

Biblical archeology is a hobby of mine. This book was a very welcomed gift from a colleague, who is familiar with my passion for biblical archeology and with the author, Jodi Magness. Dr. Jodi Magness is the Kenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism at UNC-Chapel Hill. She is especially keen on the period from first century B.C. to first century A.D.

This is an excellent book for me, but perhaps would be too dry for many readers. It is written more as a reference book than as a popular archeology book. There are over 300 citations to Scripture and many other ancient writings. There 204 different modern authors cited in this book and there are 1,041 endnotes.

If you are like me, you love your study Bible with its helpful explanations at the bottom of each page. These explanations often help us understand: historical context; idiomatic expressions; and customs that are being referenced. I often wonder whether or not the footnote I am reading is grounded in strong scholarship. Jodi Maness' book is a testimony to idea that the culture of Jesus' time is solidly reconstructable. Her book allows me to have greater confidence in the footnotes in a study Bible.

While I am not certain that I can point to many new things that learned, it is a terrific book (for me) and I am glad that I read it. I gained a richness and depth in my understanding of Jesus' ministry context. Here are few of my most satisfying take-aways:

- Ceremonial cleanliness is not the same as purity from sin. Ceremonial cleanliness was hotly debated by various communities (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, etc.) and even within each of the communities. One source of aggravation expressed by Jesus in the Gospels was the imposition priestly ceremonial laws on the masses. Jodi Magness cites many writings that capture various sides in the conflict. Quoting primary sources to provide details of the debates was interesting. One particularly lengthy and complicated debate involved how *corpse impurity* (derived from Numbers 19:11-18) is transmitted and whether there are distinctions between primary impurity and secondary impurity. This lengthy discussion helped to make the Luke 11:43-44 text come alive. "Woe to you Pharisees! You love the chief seats in the synagogues and the greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, which men walk across without even noticing."
- A better understanding of burial practices in Jesus's time is to be gained in this book. A rock cut tomb is very costly and used only by rich families and for many generations. The use of trench burials was the norm for the poor working masses. I was intrigued by the historical references (e.g., Heggesippus' account) to the headstone (stele) at the site of James the Just (Jesus brother) who was thrown from the temple and having survived the fall was stoned to death.

- Apart from a number of facts about archeological sciences and insights into the meaning of several Scripture references, I also developed an appreciation for the community at Qumran (i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls community). Most other authors seem to treat this community as a peculiar and hyper-devout religious community. They almost always point to their abstaining from going to the bathroom on the Sabbath. Jodi Magness' book casts this community in a different light. First, she captures the many voices of the contemporary debates on ceremonial purity. I come away with the sense that this community was trying to be faithful to what they believed and that they lived with great integrity. This integrity caused them to shun the established church of the high priest and the temple, but it also precluded them offering sacrifices upon an alternative altar.

This book has a lot of richness and depth to it. Its use of primary sources allows the reader to immerse in debates on various topics that guided the life of Jesus, his followers, and the culture at large. It helped bring into focus that there was a lot of tension on almost every imaginable element of religious life in Jesus' time. Jesus did not so much disrupt the peace, but rather spoke Truth into the turmoil of his day.