Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context

Former Baptist minister David Instone-Brewer wrote this book out of a pastoral concern for those needing counseling regarding an unfaithful spouse. Individuals were concerned that the Bible prohibited them from divorcing, even after repeated acts of unfaithfulness.

David Instone-Brewer, now a research fellow and technical officer with the large biblical research library and publisher Tyndale House, holds primary research interests in the area of rabbinic texts prior to A.D. 70.

He understands that most contemporary teaching on divorce is based on the received tradition of the church, filtered through 2,000 years of interpretation and the daily issues in the lives of believers. He attempts to reconstruct how ancient Jewish and Jewish-Christian hearers would have understood Jesus’ claims on the concept.

For Instone-Brewer, the modern interpreter should attempt to enter the world of the ancient audience prior to jumping to contemporary conclusions. The interpretation of the ancient audience should affect our own interpretation.

The 11 chapters are organized chronologically rather than thematically. He begins with the ancient Near Eastern records that inform the world of the Old Testament, and proceeds through teachings in the Pentateuch, Later Prophets, Qumran, rabbinic teaching, Jesus’ teaching, Pauline writings, early church history, later church history and modern teachings. He closes with a chapter of pastoral insights.

Instone-Brewer states that Jesus taught six things about marriage: 1) there is no
special standing for marriage; remaining single is acceptable; 2) monogamous relationships are best; 3) marriage should be lifelong; 4) adultery does not necessitate getting a divorce; 5) adultery is the only justifiable cause for divorce; and 6) “no-fault” divorce is invalid.

He concludes that Jesus rejected the rabbinic teaching of no-fault divorce but did permit divorce after repeated marital unfaithfulness. Churches should encourage couples to remain faithful, even to the point of forgiving the adulterer. If a spouse is unwilling to change, however, the church should allow and encourage the spouse to end the marriage.

The depth of research and critical insights reveal a study that engages biblical texts incisively and bridges the gap between the ancient and modern world effectively.

Instone-Brewer is reluctant to impose his own interpretations on the passages. He is willing to offer redemptive pastoral advice, and he acknowledges that many contemporary situations are not reflected in the world of the ancient audience.

Noting the Greco-Roman influence on Jesus’ audience would have improved the book. For instance, Instone-Brewer cites a number of rabbinic texts to further his claims of the rabbis’ widespread influence on the audience. He does not note, however, Greco-Roman sociological, historical and theological perspectives that could also have influenced hearers.

He cites some evidence in his discussion of Pauline literature, but scholars have stated fairly decisively that among the common people in Palestine by the first century, Greco-Roman influence was just as prevalent as rabbinic teaching. Literary and historical texts from prominent Greco-Roman writers would illuminate his argument.

Despite this shortcoming, Instone-Brewer presents a strong case for ministers to rethink how they counsel individuals and guide the church through these difficult situations.
William D. Shiell is senior pastor of Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo, Texas.

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