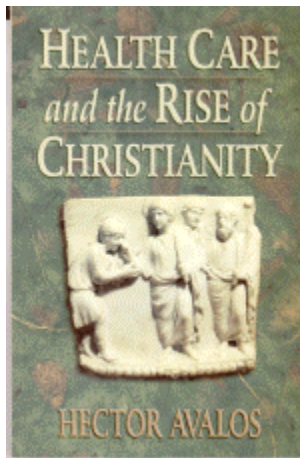


RBL 03/15/2000



Avalos, Hector

Health Care and the Rise of Christianity

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999. Pp. x + 166, Paperback, \$12.99, ISBN 1565633377.

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The thesis of this brief study is that the notions of health care reflected in early Christianity constitute a system that was an important factor in attracting converts. This health care system had clear advantages over other health care systems of the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, many New Testament writers manifest explicit concerns with promoting the advantages of Christian health care vis-à-vis health care practices found in traditional Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. As major tools of research in this study, Avalos elects to use the disciplines in which he has been formally trained: anthropology and biblical studies.

Chapter One (Health Care as a System) presents key definitions (system, illness, disease, patient, contagion) with the curious omission of a definition of health. The second and third chapters give an overview of the Israelite health care systems (note the plural; though the Levitical tradition dominates, other options are available) and the major Greco-Roman traditions (e.g., Asclepius, Isis, Mithraism, secular Greco-Roman traditions) respectively.

Chapters Four through Eight review socioreligious frameworks of these health care systems; their therapeutic strategies; economics; geographical accessibility; and proper time for seeking health care. While the Levitical system sought to remove the chronically ill from the community, Christianity sought to keep families intact. Further, Christianity's therapeutic strategies were considerably more simple than those of the other systems. To its great advantage, Christian health care charged no fee while other systems did. The role of faith in the healing process and the availability of itinerant healers made the Christian

health care system geographically more accessible than those systems requiring travel to a centralized shrine. Finally, unlike other systems where opportunities for healing were restricted to certain times, Christian health care was readily available at any time. Therapy was immediate.

Chapter Nine makes a comparative synthesis of the health care systems examined in the book. Endnotes, a bibliography, and three indexes (subjects; modern authors; ancient sources) complete the book.

Avalos sketches an interesting hypothesis about the importance of health care in the rise of Christianity. His tools of choice (anthropology; biblical studies) are very appropriate but inadequate by themselves. Page after page of this book make it clear that his hermeneutic scenarios are rooted in a culture other than that of the ancient, Mediterranean world. Thus, to talk about fees and economic advantages or disadvantages in these ancient Mediterranean health care systems fails to recognize that economics in that culture is not a free-standing or formal institution as in the modern West but rather embedded in kinship and politics. In similar fashion, the chapter reflecting on socioreligious frameworks fails to recognize that religion in ancient Mediterranean culture not a free-standing or formal institution as in modern Western culture. It was rather a substantive institution embedded in kinship and politics. Thus there was domestic economy, political economy, domestic religion (household gods), and political religion (temples).

Avalos discusses neither of these central social institutions. Because he seems unaware of this basic cultural reality, Avalos postulates that the rise of "the state" and other suprafamilial organizations that defined the worth of human beings worked great changes in antiquity. Political scientists and political anthropologists remind us that the historical reality of "nation states" emerged in the various political movements of the 18th century (e.g., The American Declaration of Independence; the French Revolution). What existed in antiquity is a very different reality. One must use the word "state" for antiquity with caution and with proper definition.

Perhaps it is his formal training in anthropology that leads him to dismiss authors, scholars, and methods summarily without explaining his judgments. Thus concerning Kleinman, the medical anthropologist, Avalos writes: "nor can all aspects of his theories be applied in biblical studies" (p. 20). Which aspects can and which can't? Why or why not? Similarly with regard to Mary Douglas, the reader is told: "for all its useful application in biblical studies, [her model] has significant limitations, especially in explaining purity laws and illness" (p. 9, with a footnote directing the reader to one study summarizing debates about her work). How are his readers who do not possess his formal anthropological training to evaluate Kleinman and sort through the debates among

anthropologists about Douglas? How can the reader avoid concluding that Avalos' *ipse dixit* suffices?

His confusion of anthropology and sociology is similarly disappointing considering his boast of formal training in anthropology. Sociology is the study of one's own society; anthropology is the comparative study of many societies, allowing for comparisons and generalizations. The fact that Avalos draws upon medical sociology to gain "economic" insights and make "economic" judgments about the ancient Near East is one possible explanation for some of his anachronistic and ethnocentric conclusions on these matters (e.g., the "lost wages" and "fees"). Of course, the anachronistic use of the terms "Jews" and "Christians" for the historical period before the Talmuds and Constantine respectively probably derives from biblical studies that have not yet been up-dated.

His criticism of my work and that of other scholars like myself who utilize an "interdisciplinary approach without the benefit of formal training in the relevant disciplines (p. 9)" is surprising for its patent hubris and amusing in its naivete. The widely known and frequently reported opinion of the revered anthropologist Meyer Fortes is worth repeating. The best interdisciplinary co-operation is often that which is carried out in the mind of a single researcher! This kind of interdisciplinary cooperation is common in the hybrid discipline known as biblical studies. Few if any biblical scholars have formal training in history, linguistics, numismatics, archaeology, paleopathology, and all the other topics that they regularly use in conducting scientific biblical research.

Because he places such importance in formal training, Avalos would be well advised to take courses in Mediterranean anthropology. Information from this discipline would suggest more appropriate translations and interpretations of the ancient Mediterranean literary documents he has cited in their original languages in his end-notes. Mediterranean anthropology would also produce more plausible interpretations of the Mediterranean evidence than those he has offered. The confusion of anthropology with sociology has not served him well. The Mediterranean cultural plausibility of Avalos' hypothesis is still open to and deserving of exploration. It has not taken place in this book.