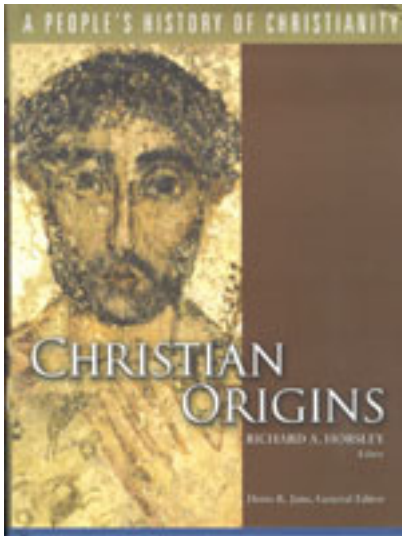


RBL 06/2006



Horsley, Richard A., ed.

Christian Origins

A People's History of Christianity

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. Pp. xv + 318. Hardcover.
\$35.00. ISBN 080063411X.

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This collection of essays by twelve different authors constitutes the inaugural volume of A People's History of Christianity (www.peopleshistoryofchristianity.com), a project the aim of which is sociohistorical: to move studies of the history of Christianity beyond investigations of elite, intellectual ("great books"), patriarchal ("great men") doctrine and/or church history to the perspectives and practices of common people, including women and slaves, in their everyday lives. The series is geared to students and popular audiences (e.g., footnotes and bibliography are at a minimum).

Richard Horsley's introduction attempts to set the greater enterprise in context. Crucial is a brief discussion of sources where he admits the problem they pose for scholars of "the people's" approach (14–16): "Investigation of people's history ... faces a serious problem with regard to sources" (14). Noting important difficulties such as that (1) "ordinary people ... seldom left written sources as evidence of their own stories, hopes, and actions," (2) "the literate elite ... rarely mention ordinary people," (3) "the people make the papers only when they make trouble for their rulers," (4) "the authors of written texts ... were almost always male" who (5) "tended to write women out of history" (cf. also Elliott's discussion, 178–81), Horsley nevertheless skirts effortlessly past these issues to assert that early Christians were "unique" in antiquity as "ordinary people" who "left texts that survive in writing" to "provide more or less direct sources for these people's movements" (14–15; cf. 5, where Horsley includes "texts" under the "sources"

of “people’s history”). Here it is acutely evident that “the people’s” approach dictates meaning for the sources and not the other way around.

Subsequent essays are grouped loosely into three categories: “Early Jesus Movements” (essays by Richard A. Horsley, William R. Herzog II, Antoinette Clark Wire, Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley), “Cities and Texts” (essays by Ray Pickett, Warren Carter, Allen Dwight Callahan, Neil Elliott), and “Social Patterns and Practices” (essays by Carolyn Osiek, Clarice J. Martin, Steven J. Friesen, Barbara R. Rossing). Most of these essays find original (i.e., advanced level and thorough) expression in previous works of these authors (e.g., Richard A. Horsley with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* [Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999 (1985)]; William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994]; Antoinette Clark Wire, *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002]; Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002]; Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* [Harrisburg: Trinity, 2001]; etc.). The following observations aim to highlight a few central claims of this volume.

William Herzog’s article, “Why Peasants Responded to Jesus,” characterizes Jesus as a “reputational leader” (69), arguing Jesus attracted peasants to his movement because, as a “product of village life” himself, Jesus shared their norms and values. Herzog downplays Jesus’ charismatic authority, rather favoring influence based on “the successful criticism and dislocation of the higher-order norms which legitimate the authority prevailing in a given society” (69). Informing this viewpoint is Paulo Freire’s concept “pedagogy of the oppressed” (55–58). On Herzog’s reading, Jesus, like Freire, teaches “illiterate peasants” (55) by means of “verbal codifications” (58). Freire’s “codifications” are “visual pictures that posed a problem and objectified some aspect of peasants’ lives” (56); Jesus’ “codifications” are his parables (58).

Antoinette Clark Wire’s article, “Women’s History from Birth-Prophecy Stories,” projects “through literary texts to oral sources,” at which point folklore studies provide the means of analysis. Wire examines a total of twenty-six “birth-prophecies,” from the centuries before and after Jesus’ birth. She divides them into two groups: (1) birth-prophecies about past biblical figures and (2) birth-prophecies about contemporary leaders (74). She then identifies them not just as derived from *oral contexts* (77–78) but as evidence of “*women’s storytelling*” (80, emphasis added). On Wire’s argument, “*women’s storytelling*” then becomes “*stories of women’s history*” (89, emphasis added), affording Wire the opportunity to pronounce with regard to the movements of John the Baptist and Jesus: “Women had a leading voice in the shaping of emerging Christian history” (92).

Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley's "Turning the Tables on Jesus: The Mandaean View" explores the possibility that Mandaean texts, such as *Haran Gawaita*, the *Book of John*, and the *Ginza* inform discussions of Christian origins. Buckley's assumption that "of all the groups connected in some way with the origins of Christianity, the only one that still survives is the Mandaeans" (94) clarifies the article's view of the relevance of these lesser-known texts to the topic. In the discussion Buckley constructs as polemical the position of the Mandaean texts on various aspects of New Testament Christianities; for example, (1) "to give Paul the negative epithet 'messiah' hints at a conjoined Mandaean and Judean-Christian opposition to Gentile Christianity" (107); (2) "this particular Mandaean tradition attacks a Pauline view of Jesus and his followers" (107); (3) "their [Mandaean] arguments against Judean traditions constitute a parallel to the activity of Jesus, who also contested the Israelite heritage" (109); and, (4) "but rejecting both Adonai and (Jesus as) the messiah, the Mandaeans may well have become the inventors of—or at least contributors to the development of—Gnosticism" (109). While the present reviewer is not qualified to judge the merit of these comparisons, it can be said that most scholars deny any connection between Baptist followers and the rise of Mandaeanism. Kurt Rudolph's verdict is recalled: "*Johannes der Täufer und seine Jüngerschaft haben nach dem Befund der uns zugänglichen Quellen keine Beziehung zu den Mandäern gehabt*" (*Die Mandäer* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960], 1:80, emphasis original).

Like Wire, Warren Carter associates himself with the movement known as New Historicism (140). Reliant on both Marxist criticism and cultural studies, New Historicist scholars read literary texts (such as a Renaissance play in the research of Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980]) with the purpose of recovering the contexts of exploitation in which they emerged. Carter's piece, entitled "Matthew's People," takes as its key presupposition the "tough living conditions" (138) of Matthew's Judean audience in Antioch in the late first century. Carter characterizes Matthew's audience as the "poor and poorer" (139), background informing his view that the First Gospel exposes "the Empire's strategies and structures of control and evaluates them negatively in relation to God's purposes." Carter adds that the Gospel of Matthew "advocates alternative practices that embody God's purposes and shape Matthew's people into a community marked by an alternative social experience" (146; see also the section title: "God's Empire versus Rome's" [146]). Through an unsystematic citation of passages from Matthew's Gospel, Carter conveys his impression of "Matthew's people" as a "countercultural community" (153) who "contrast with the hierarchical and tyrannical norms of the Empire" (153) by (1) "household structures that challenge conventional household patterns" (153), (2) not "invest[ing] themselves in the exploitative quest for wealth and status" (153), (3) "an alternative

economic system and community based in repentance and care for the poor” (154), and (4) rejecting “violent attacks on or withdrawal from Roman imperial society” (155).

The first essay in the volume to acknowledge that the social status (e.g., class) of New Testament early Christians is not self-evident (202), Carolyn Osiek’s “Family Matters,” seeks to grasp Christian origins through investigations of family life in the Roman Empire. To this end, she provides a modest overview of material remains of housing, burial sites, methods of sanitation, and public baths (203–5). The variety of approaches to family in the New Testament (some of which Osiek explores) is informed by this context.

Finally, Steven Friesen’s “Injustice or God’s Will: Explanations of Poverty in Proto-Christian Communities” addresses economic inequality among early Christian texts, asking whether these texts present “theories about *why* economies are unjust” and/or recommendations on *how* to respond (240). Eliminating Hebrews, 1, 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, Jude, *1 Clement* and the letters of Ignatius as lacking the relevant evidence (and leaving the evidence of the Gospels and Pauline literature to others in the volume), Friesen claims that James, Revelation, Acts, and the Shepherd of Hermas provide “models for analysis and for action” (241). In James (“the Letter of Jacob” [241]), the blame for an unjust Roman imperial economy lies with “local elites” (e.g., “Jacob 2:1–6”) *and* with the general population “for complicity” (244). This letter’s recommendation for response is “participation in the community of faith and works” (247). In Revelation, the blame for economic injustice lies with the “larger system”: “the Roman Empire authorizes local aristocracies to exploit commercial interactions and to dominate their regions” (248). In response, Revelation calls for a “complete break with dominant society” (250). According to Friesen, Acts, “not a people’s history,” “is silent on the issue of economic justice” (251). Its program, therefore, “restricts economic redistribution among believers to an idealized past in Palestine and focuses ... economic policy on alms and charity rather than on injustice” (251). Shepherd of Hermas is similar to Acts in that “economic inequality is simply a fact” (255). Whereas Acts recommends charity within the community, “charity in *Hermas* is portrayed as an individual act that helps the poor in material terms and helps the rich at the final judgment” (257). Friesen includes a helpful chart (fig. 11.1, p. 243), “Poverty Scale for a Large City in the Roman Empire,” some data of which also appear in Ray Pickett’s “diagram of Roman social order” (fig. 5.2, p. 115).

With its general aim of social history, the current volume carries forward lines of research begun by Robert M. Grant, John Gager, Abraham J. Malherbe, Wayne A. Meeks, Gerd Theissen, and other important scholars of Christian origins. Distinguishing this project (both the series and this volume’s essays) from these illustrious predecessors, however, is open exploitation of Karl Marx’s expression and concept, “das Volk” (“the

people”) (1859). The scholars mentioned above came of age during the Cold War, when Marxism was generally regarded as a threat. Their interests in social history derived from an expanding view of early Christianity, a result of taking seriously extracanonical texts and perspectives and acknowledging diverse opinions within the New Testament itself. In contrast, this present generation of “people’s history” historians openly embraces Marxism’s central idiom as descriptive of their project.

This perspective is not limited to the key word, “people,” but is traceable as a recurring theme throughout the essays. The dichotomy of high culture/subculture and domination/subordination underlies virtually every aspect of every argument. The strategy appears to be deliberate. In a table (5) at the beginning of his introduction to the book, Richard Horsley describes the project in precisely these terms, pitting “ordinary people” against “elites such as ‘kings and wars,’” “rulers” against the “ruled,” and “popular tradition” against “elite culture.” The use of a table makes the contrasts stark, emphasizing the simplicity of the dichotomous model governing the approach. Warren Carter likewise depicts in chart form “the people’s” versus “traditional” history (140).

Although the source problem poses a near insurmountable difficulty to the “people’s history,” for the present reviewer at least, an even more basic oversight is endorsement of a model of society in which humanity necessarily comprises two unevenly sized people groups construed as binary opposites (cf. Herzog’s theme of “a great divide” [48 ff.]). This model, adopted in these essays as a ready parallel for ancient Roman society (e.g., *honestiores* and *humiliores* [208]), begets facile oppositional approaches not just to politics, economics, and society but to culture, history, and literature. It is both inaccurate and misleading.

Returning to the important American forefather of social history and early Christianity, Robert M. Grant (himself influenced by others, such as Shirley Jackson Case and Donald W. Riddle), as Margaret M. Mitchell points out in her foreword to the newly reprinted *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World*, Grant’s interest in social history was complex. Mitchell writes,

Yet we also learn from Grant’s example that *it is unnecessary and unwise to set social history in opposition to intellectual history, given that in the lives of the actual Christian persons whom we know, and those we can only glimpse, the two were hardly separable. Grant’s Augustus to Constantine* puts social history deftly into rich conversation with the emergence of early Christian thought, for he keenly appreciates the extent to which the intellectual work of these early writers was largely part of a project of self-understanding and self-defense of their place within the worldly order, regarded as part of the unfolding of a

divine, mysterious plan. Because worldview is not utterly predetermined by environment—though it is shaped by it and is, in turn, a tool in reshaping that vision—the best scholarship must embrace the two. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990 [1st ed. 1970] xxv, emphasis added).

In order to build effectively on Grant's important legacy, it remains for members of the guild today to recapture the nuance and complexity of his sociohistorical work.

That said, for readers interested in how social historians reconstruct Christian origins or for those focusing on the topics of women or slaves and early Christianity, these essays offer a resource. Numerous black and white illustrations/figures throughout the edition are unexceptional (e.g., 9, 17, 37, 134, 149). The eleven plates following page 126 are, however, noteworthy. The book contains one helpful index of names/subjects.