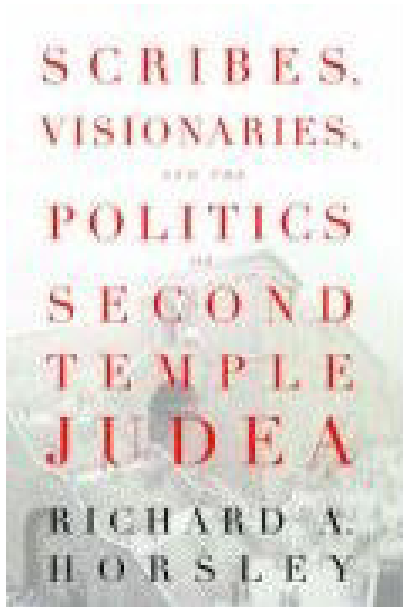


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Horsley, Richard A.

Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea

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In many ways this study arises from the SBL Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism and Early Christianity Group, of which Richard Horsley was a founding member. The focus of the book is on the three texts of 1 Enoch, Ben Sira, and Daniel, but a central concern is the wisdom and apocalyptic concepts and their relationship. Two initial chapters survey Judah in the Persian and early Hellenistic period to the Maccabean revolt. Chapter 3 discusses what Ben Sira indicates about the sociology of Judea, with a focus on the “priestly aristocracy” and the place of scribes in that society. Chapter 4 expands on “scribes and sages” and leads into chapter 5, on “orality, writing, and the cultivation of texts” and chapter 6 on the cultural repertoire of Judean scribes. Each of the next three chapters is devoted to a specific writing (Ben Sira, 1 Enoch, and Daniel), and the study ends with a concluding chapter. Unfortunately, there is no composite bibliography, and there are endnotes instead of footnotes. The general index includes some modern authors but not all of those cited in the text and notes.

When it comes to summarizing some of his main points and conclusions, there is much to applaud and agree with. Particularly important is the argument that wisdom and apocalyptic do not represent water-tight opposing outlooks and that different scribal circles cultivated and passed on a variety of traditions and perspectives. Yet wisdom and

apocalyptic as binary opposites seems to be more of a New Testament issue these days. Gerhard von Rad was famously criticized for basing apocalyptic on wisdom, but then already four decades ago H.-P. Müller associated apocalyptic with mantic wisdom (in articles that Horsley does not cite: “Magisch-mantische Weisheit und die Gestalt Daniels,” *UF* 1 [1969]: 79–94; “Mantische Weisheit und Apokalyptik,” in *Congress Volume, Uppsala 1971* [VTSup 22; Leiden: Brill, 1972], 268–93), which has been widely accepted, at least by scholars of Second Temple Judaism.

Particularly effective are chapters 5–6, in which Horsley summarizes a lot of important recent studies on literacy and orality. The picture he paints—correct in the view of a number of specialists in the subject—is of the centrality of oral teaching, oral preservation, and orality of culture in Israel and Judah, even when literacy had developed. Even the existence of texts does not mean that these texts were preserved for their content, were studied and quoted, or were even read privately, much less publicly. Texts were often “known” because they had been memorized and remembered. Reading texts was cumbersome, even when they were available. Yet the “biblical text” was late in developing, with many different traditions circulating and drawn on. There was no “canon” of authoritative books until very late. In any case, Jewish society was much more extensive than the picture emerging from the biblical books alone.

I agree with much of this (as discussed in “The Law, the Prophets, and the Rest: The State of the Bible in Pre-Maccabean Times,” *DSD* 13 [2006]: 319–38). But then it is often forgotten the extent to which our own world is an oral one, even in our age of almost universal literacy. Those of us at universities spend much of our time in oral communication, not only in the classroom but also in conversation with colleagues, in seminars, and in committee discussion (formal minutes are taken of these committee sessions, but their relation to what actually went on can sometimes be quite tenuous). We live in a world not only of letters, memos, and email but also of the telephone, especially the ubiquitous mobile (cellular) phone. But Horsley has a tendency to take a good idea and go too far with it.

He emphasizes that the scribe spent much of his time in oral teaching and communication (101–11). But here I believe he is misled by the idealized description of the scribe in Ben Sira 38:24–39:11; indeed, he keeps interchanging “scribe” with “sage.” When we look at how scribes actually functioned in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, their office was not primarily one of teacher or “sage.” Although “scribe” might just as well be rendered “secretary,” which means that some individuals were high administrative functionaries and not just writers, nevertheless, the essential job of the scribe was the writing, recording, and filing of written records relating to daily life. We have to keep in mind that the scribes in biblical texts often combine scribalizing with

being priests and Levites: these latter offices might include teaching. Also, some scribes might have had the luxury of devoting their time to the “laws of God” or the “cultural heritage,” but most scribes (in Judah, as elsewhere) were more like clerks who issued receipts, notarized, recorded, kept accounts, wrote letters, issued memoranda, and made sure copies were available for consultation. This is likely to apply to the scribes of the temple as much as to those elsewhere in society. This is especially true if the number of scribes was only a “few score” (121), which is surely correct for not only the late Persian period but also much of the early Hellenistic period.

Similarly, he seems to discount the extent to which a certain body of writings—not just oral traditions—had started to gain a position of authority for most Jews by about 300 B.C.E. Recognizing the existence of variant books, texts, and a whole body of “parabiblical traditions” that maintained a lesser or greater independence from the biblical text should not make us overlook the widespread evidence of a core of writings by the beginning of the Greek period. In the middle of the third century B.C.E., the Jewish community of Alexandria did not translate an amorphous set of floating traditions; they translated a definitive set of five books with a text not a million kilometers distant from that which became standard in the Jewish community after the fall of Jerusalem. Horsley is too “know-nothing” about Ben Sira’s “praise of the fathers” (44–50) as indicating a set of books that he himself had consulted. He does not seem to understand (1) that the list of content of this section follows in a remarkable way the contents of the extant biblical text and (2) that here and there are direct quotes from the extant biblical text (see my *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, 1:337–41). For example, Ben Sira’s reference to Enoch is not to the hero of 1 Enoch nor to a vague figure of oral tradition but actually quotes verbatim from our current text of Gen 5:24. His reference to the “Twelve Prophets” cannot plausibly be considered independent of the Minor Prophets of our present Bibles: we know of this collection of “twelve prophets” only from the fact that they are gathered into a book, not from some unwritten tradition. Are we to assume that the community in Alexandria wanted access to a copy of the Pentateuch in their own language but that Ben Sira, who lived next to the temple and consorted with priests, had never actually looked at the Pentateuch, the Former and Latter Prophets, and some of the writings that he refers to?

Similarly, Horsley’s correct emphasis on the place of the “priestly aristocracy” leads him to deny that there was also a “lay aristocracy” (63–65). This is absurd. A passage such as the Elephantine letter (*TAD* A4.7:18–19), naming the high priest, his companions the priests, and the nobles, becomes redundant if “nobles” equals “priests.” Why not just recognize that there was an aristocracy, which included both priests and nonpriests, especially when Horsley himself goes on to say that “perhaps not all members of the aristocracy were priests” (64)? Fortunately, Horsley’s common sense usually reasserts

itself in the end, and his summaries (128–29, 193–206) generally ignore or tone down his wilder flights of fancy.

I feel that his chapter on the Persian empire is unsatisfactory. The main problem is that he tries to synthesize several recent monographs that, in my view, promote theses that cannot be sustained in the light of our knowledge of the Persian Empire. He/they create a Persian Empire that I do not recognize from the sources, which is maintained only by selective reading and overinterpretation of biblical texts. Curiously, though, this chapter seems to contribute little to the book and could have been omitted without anyone's noticing its absence.

Horsley makes a number of other points. He has problems with the common characterization of certain writings as “apocalypses,” but whether in the end that leads to great consequences is debatable. He argues that “Daniel and the texts of *1 Enoch* do not attest an ‘apocalyptic worldview’” (204). This is a complicated issue that I discuss at length in my forthcoming volume 2 of *History of the Jews and Judaism* ([London: T&T Clark, 2008], 260–62, 306–11). More significant are his arguments that the writings of Ben Sira, *1 Enoch*, and Daniel reflect responses “to the escalating crisis of rival aristocratic factions struggling for power and position in Jerusalem in relation to rival imperial regimes” (201). This in many ways is at the heart of his book, but it needs careful study; therefore, I must beg to defer consideration of this position to volume 3 of my *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*.

Much of Horsley's interest over the years has been on Jewish society and what we can learn about it from the application of sociological principles, concerns very evident in this study. The author clearly acknowledges “that this book is not the work of a specialist on second-temple Judea and its texts” (viii). On the other hand, he has made significant contributions to understanding Judean society in the later part of the Second Temple period. The synthesis that Horsley has now created for an earlier part of Second Temple times is one that deserves careful study. There are many different parts to it, and each one needs to be investigated individually. Dr. Horsley has given us much to think about.