Since the author’s first publication of his essay “Jesus and Agrarian Palestine: The Factor of Debt” (Society of Biblical Literature 1985 Seminar Papers), his thesis of widespread indebtedness in the Galilee of Jesus’s time has been resonating in scholarly circles. Later Oakman added presentations on the Lord’s Prayer and on Jesus as a tax resister. These three essays are now collected here along with an introduction and brief conclusion to form his current offering.

Oakman’s thesis is that Jesus wanted debt forgiveness in first-century Palestinian society. Jesus had an explicitly “subversive revolutionary agenda” (41) that “attracted a following of people victimized by debt” (41). In addition, developing this theme further, Oakman maintains that Jesus was a tax resister who tried to alleviate indebtedness by avoiding payment of taxes and by distortion of the tax records (100). He compares Jesus with Judas of Gamla, both of whom were tax resisters (61, 101). Jesus was a political revolutionary, albeit not a violent one (117). Jesus’s ministry/activity was political and not about “religion or theology” (117).

After surveying evidence for indebtedness as a significant social problem in Judea (23, the existence of the *prozbul* and the story of burning the debt records in Jerusalem at the
outbreak of the Jewish War), Oakman grants that the only evidence for first-century Galilean debt as a major problem is in the parables of the gospels (27). Further, Oakman admits that using parables (e.g., Matt 18:23–35, Luke 16:1–8, 7:41–42) as accurate pictures of society can be tricky (33) and that his socioeconomic interpretations of the parables can certainly be challenged, since Jesus intentionally obfuscated their meaning to protect himself (34). Nevertheless, Oakman maintains, based on the parables, that indebtedness was a widespread social problem in first-century Galilee and that Jesus’s ministry was aimed at alleviating it.

The chapter analyzing the Lord’s Prayer stratifies Q into Q¹ and Q². The former is the “product of Herodian scribes” and the latter the “product of Judean scribes.” Oakman then posits three stages to the prayer: stage 1, the form of the prayer in Jesus’s own usage, consisting of the address (Abba) and petitions 4–7; stage 2, the “difficult-to-trace transition from oral-Aramaic to written-Greek forms of the Prayer”; and stage 3, the form of the prayer reached by the latest stratum of Q, which consists of the address and petitions 1–7 (thus adding petitions 1–3 [90]). The key to Oakman’s analysis is petition 5, which he translates, “and forgive us our money debts as we forgive those who owe us money” (51). Thus the prayer was originally about “oppression, indebtedness, hunger, and social insecurity” (90).

Oakman maintains in the last full chapter that Jesus advocated tax resistance as the “concrete expression of the kingdom of God” (94) and that, because of his tax resistance, Jesus was crucified. Specifically, Jesus wanted to encourage tax evasion and the distortion of the tax records. This chapter then proceeds to run through a few well-known gospel texts to try out this interpretation of Jesus the tax resister. It suggests that many of the teachings attributed to Jesus were given to his disciples to help them cope with the harsh tax collectors. Thus Luke 6:27 (“love your enemies”) refers to loving tax collectors, and Luke 6:29 (turn the other cheek) refers to offering the cheek to tax collectors. Nor did Jesus omit teachings aimed at the tax collectors. For example, writes Oakman, Matt 10:10 (carry no staff) refers to tax collectors carrying a staff to enforce their tax collections, while Luke 10:9 (heal the sick) refers to tax collectors’ obligation as “physicians” to heal by reducing tax loads (101–7).

Full disclosure: the current reviewer does not agree with many of the author’s conclusions and has written to that effect elsewhere. Perhaps this disagreement has colored the following critique. First, there are quite a few historical judgments made in this monograph without sufficient evidence, such as: Jesus had no use for priestly values such as ritual purity (44); Jesus was illiterate (46); any apocalyptic “readings” of Jesus are from a later time (46); those working in the “building trades” were lowly and barely eked out a living (66); begging and brigandage were increasing during Jesus’s lifetime (71); and Rom
13:1–7 is a late first-century interpolation (10). These are debated issues today in historical Jesus research and deserve more than a passing notice. Second, and connected to the first criticism, Oakman spends too little time convincing the reader to join him in his unique reading of the gospels. As Oakman allows, his “evidence is more indirect than direct” (95). Again, he writes, “These sayings assume a quite different aspect when they are understood to reflect the tax-resistance praxis of Jesus!” (104). Precisely, but why should one understand them so? Third, Oakman makes too great a difference between politics and religion/theology (117). This radical polarization in understanding ancient people seems to me to be anachronistic. Why must one understand Jesus’s aims as either political or theological? Finally, throughout this collection of essays Oakman assumes oppression of the average village resident (33, 90). His approach appears to have been fueled by his a priori acceptance of class-conflict social theory. Although I can sympathize with this social theory as applied to the ancient Greco-Roman world, some defense of this assumption is warranted.

That said, one must confess that Oakman is never boring. These essays are very creative and intriguing. They are surely the result of a fertile mind deeply immersed in modern social theory. Because of that they will, and should, spark continued debate.