Oakman, Douglas E., and K. C. Hanson

*Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*


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Hanson and Oakman’s famous book is now available from Fortress Press with a CD-ROM. This book comes from two authors who are experts in the field of social structure of the ancient Mediterranean societies. Their book explores mainly major social institutions of Roman Palestine such as kinship, politics economy, and religion. The textbook format is informative and augmented by maps, illustrations, chronological charts, and photographs of ancient sites. This is very informative not only for students and scholars of the New Testament but for a broad spectrum of readers because the authors use a variety of scholarly techniques and methods, offering a fresh picture of the historical and social background of New Testament times. The book is a profitable introduction and guide to the social institutions of Palestine and a valuable general resource book. Knowing these institutions, we understand the impact that they had upon Jesus and traditions within the Gospels.

The authors’ aim is to examine the primary social institutions of first-century Palestine through a social-scientific methodology and to present testable models that can be employed in the study of the Bible. There are six chapters followed by three glossaries of terms. The last one contains the social-scientific and cross-
cultural terms that are used in this work and that the reader meets, perhaps, for the first time. The bibliography is divided in three parts, and the last sixteen pages include indexes of ancient sources, subjects, and authors cited. Each chapter follows the same structure. It contains a list of questions that each chapter raises, a presentation of specific models or scenarios and application of these models to New Testament passages, and, finally, recommended readings.

The first chapter is an introduction to the social system of Roman Palestine. The principal theoretical frameworks employed are macrosociology, systems sociology, and cultural anthropology. The authors' concern is to focus on the social situation of Palestinian peasant life confronted by Jesus and the earliest groups of his followers. Here Hanson and Oakman state that first-century Palestine was an advanced agrarian society in which only kinship and politics were explicit social domains. Economics, religion, and education were all embedded in kinship or politics. In the second chapter, the focus is upon the institution of family and its structure. The endogamous family type is presented as the most common in ancient Israel. Hanson and Oakman explore all its characteristics. Genealogical systems, descent, marriage, exogamy, dowry, divorce, and inheritance are subjects under discussion.

The third chapter, “Pyramids of Power,” examines politics and the system of patronage in Palestine. Here we can find many figures that help us understand the specific models of power. Hanson and Oakman provide us with many examples of the history of this period, such as the Herodian family. The concern is not only on elites but on peasants as well. Chapter 4 continues with another major issue with social concern, the political economy. Here questions such as how the economy was organized in antiquity or how production was organized are answered satisfactorily. The authors quote frequently not only Josephus’s descriptions but also views that come from other Greek authors to reinforce their statements. All these help us to understand better the social world behind the Gospels. Personally, working for almost three years with the social institutions of Sabbatical and Jubilee Years in the New Testament, I agree that debts and taxes were significant manifestations of political economy at the time of Jesus. This is a very important observation.

The next chapter treats political religion. Here, naturally, the focus is upon the Jerusalem temple. It is true that religion appears with multiple social connections in ancient agrarian societies. Church and state are not separated in such societies (132). In the last part of the chapter, the Jesus movement is discussed under the temple system. The last chapter of the book is the general conclusion of this
cross-cultural approach. Hanson and Oakman’s work proves that the complex social systems of ancient Mediterranean societies need such methods of analysis. The book is an excellent scholarly work that treats its complex subject with depth and is accessible to the general reader as well.

The CD-ROM was produced using the Libronix Digital Library System (LDLS) that provides multiple features of search. The LDLS software is from the same company that created the Logos Library System (LLS) and is fully compatible with all products that are based on the LLS software. The CD-ROM contains all the content of the printed volume and NRSV hyperlinks, further primary documents, additional photographs, and Internet links. The CD-ROM runs on a PC or Macintosh computer (Windows 98/98SE/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP). It will run on a Macintosh if Virtual PC for MacOS is installed. For PC users, a Pentium 300 MHz processor and 128 MB memory are recommended. For MacOS users, a G3/G4 processor is required.