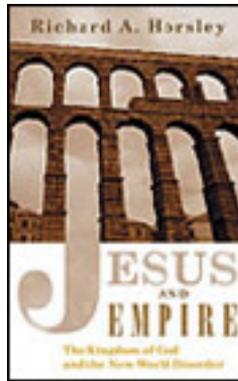


○ REVIEW OF RICHARD A. HORSLEY'S *JESUS AND EMPIRE: THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE NEW WORLD DISORDER*

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Richard Walsh reviews *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* by Richard A. Horsley. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2003. 178 pp. ISBN 080063490x.)



Horsley's book expands the Rauschenbusch lectures he delivered at Colgate-Rochester Theological School in 2001 and popularises work that he has been doing on Jesus and Empire for some years. His thesis is that Jesus performed the kingdom of God in order to criticise the oppressive injustice of the Roman Empire, from the standpoint of the Jewish peasantry, and in order to inspire the reestablishment of covenant community cooperation in Galilean villages. Jesus is, then, not a religious figure – at least, he is not religious in the modern sense. Rather, Jesus is thoroughly political.

For the lower classes, the Pax Romana was a 'new world disorder', because Empire provided economic benefits to the rulers at the expense of the colonised (chapter 1). Rome ruled through powerful locals, like the Herodian kings and the Jerusalem priests, who competed to imitate and flatter Rome and, therefore, demanded their own taxes from the people. Antipas, in particular, was responsible for particularly oppressive taxation in Galilee. Beyond taxation, the face of the Roman Empire in Palestine was terror, the brutal maintenance of the Empire at any cost, of which Jesus' crucifixion is only the most famous example. Horsley supports this description of the Roman Empire with references to his own *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (1995); *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee* (1996); and *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (1997).

The Jews resisted Empire with peasant slowdowns and sabotage, prophetic and messianic movements, scribal writings, counter-terrorism, and (four actual) revolts (chapter 2). This sketch follows Horsley's earlier work: (with John S. Hanson) *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (1985); *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resist-*

ance in Roman Palestine (1987); and *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (1989). In the main, Jewish resistance arose from below, from the 'little tradition' and the 'hidden transcript', the stories told behind the backs of the dominant. The resistance built on stories of resistance in the Israelite tradition and defended that traditional way of life – not the oppressive Temple.

Advocating a 'relational' method, Horsley places Jesus in this tradition and this spectrum of resistance (chapter 3). To this context, Horsley also adds the Galilean village version of 'the moral economy of the peasant', the economic cooperation that sought to mitigate exploitation and to preserve families and villages. Information about Jesus himself, Horsley gleans by analogy from Q and Mark which he takes as performance wholes (see his publication, with Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (1999); and *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (2001)). For Horsley, Q and Mark provide 'evidence' for Jesus because their original performance context differed little from that of Jesus' own performance of the kingdom of God in Galilean and Syrian villages a few decades earlier.

The kingdom performed by Jesus, Q and Mark critiqued the present 'new world disorder' (chapter 4). Thus, Q imagines a judgment of the present hierarchy that leaves the twelve as the new rulers of Israel (22:28-30). Similarly, Mark's Jesus predicts the Temple's destruction. Further, the Markan exorcisms defeat Rome. Accordingly, Jesus is a new Jeremiah rejecting oppressive rulers in favor of the exclusive rule of God.

Jesus' performance healed the effects of Empire through exorcisms and healings and reestablished egalitarian, mutually supportive social-economic relations in Galilean village society (chapter 5). The missionary discourses organise these communities, one village at a time. In short, Jesus renewed Israel's covenant community by calling people to an active sharing of social resources during crisis and by affirming the patriarchal family (see Q 6:20-49 and Mark 10:2-45). As both Q and Mark imagine persecutions, Horsley concludes that Jesus' movement did not imagine an apocalyptic finale to Empire. Further, while Rome crucified this political threat to Roman order, possibly after his Temple demonstration, it is hardly clear that Jesus was a messianic claimant.

Horsley's Jesus is a polemical alternative to other historical Jesuses, particularly that of Crossan. In particular, Horsley critiques the anachronisms that dominate the scholarly Jesus tradition, (1) which reconstruct Jesus as a religious figure, by making the modern assumption that religion is an institution or activity separate from others, and (2) which reduce Jesus to his sayings (and worse, to those sayings that are dissimilar from his environment). By contrast, Horsley offers a political (and economic and religious) Jesus, reconstructed in relation to the historical crisis of subsistence-level Galileans caused by Empire and reconstructed by means of a performance analysis of Q and Mark. Despite differences in methodology, however, Horsley's Jesus does not differ radically from Crossan's peasant Cynic who performed the kingdom in his sayings, 'miracles', and in open commensality (surely, the latter resembles Horsley's cooperative covenant community).

Horsley's deeper problem with Crossan's Jesus lies in Horsley's desire to use Jesus to provide a prophetic critique of the present world disorder. For that agenda, the apocalyptic Jesus is too foreign – and Horsley rejects apocalyptic as a scholarly mis-construct – and the Cynic Jesus too palatable. Horsley's covenant-renewal Jesus is just right. Horsley reserves his greatest ire for

Crossan's Cynic Jesus because that Jesus advocates a mental dropout that allows the present Empire to go unchallenged.

In addition to historical Galilee and Rome, then, Horsley also depicts Jesus in the context of and as a critic of American Empire, the present-day equivalent of Rome. While he restricts this critique largely to the frame of his book – the introduction and the epilogue – he does occasionally describe ancient Empire with rhetoric designed to suggest the present. Thus, he describes the imposition of Greek culture upon Palestine as enforced 'Westernization', claims Rome gained support for its imperialism by appealing to its people's economic self-interest, and describes murderous resistance to Empire as counter-terrorism (the Empire is the first terrorist). America (the U.S.) seems a new Roman Empire, since WW2 in particular, because of the massive deployment of the U.S. military around the world and because of the globalisation of capitalism. The Bush presidencies make the comparisons with Rome's military terror and grandiose consumption of the world's resources even more compelling. In this context, Horsley's historical construct drives a wedge between Jesus, the victim of Empire, and the American Empire. As American political rhetoric and the popular media often forge an unholy alliance between Jesus and America, Horsley's disjunction is highly salutary.

Nonetheless, Horsley's prophetic critique leaves several questions. They arise in conjunction with the repeated, relational pattern that Horsley uses to reconstruct Jesus: in a particular historical crisis, out of common Israelite traditions, Jesus assumed a prophetic role in interaction with people to form his cooperative, covenant community movement. Granting Horsley's attempt to set up the parallel models of ancient Rome and contemporary America, the depiction of the present as 'a new world disorder', and even the call (I think I hear it) to America's formative notions of herself as a biblical and (Roman) republican people, the model changes in Horsley's application to the present. Once, Rome was the problem, and Jesus and other Galilean villagers resisted this Empire by appeals to their indigenous tradition. Now, America is the problem and the solution too, as the American Horsley calls other Americans (I suppose) on the basis of their biblical and republican (I suppose) traditions to some action that will establish a just political-economic order. Except for the notion that America is a problem, George W. Bush and other American messianists would likely agree. In short, Horsley's new village or covenant revitalisation program remains rather vague. Are we to revert to the moral economy of the peasant? Perhaps, the question is unfair. Horsley's last sentences sound like an attempt simply to politicise (in Roland Barthes' sense) the new world disorder. Of course, perhaps, the matter also remains vague because we have no Jesus to lead this movement, unless Horsley, like so many other historical critics before him, is that prophet. To his credit, Horsley's last lines also seem to reject that role.