

*Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society.* Richard Horsley, ed. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997.

*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.* John Dominic Crossan. San Francisco, California: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1994.

*Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation.* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. New York and London: Continuum, 2001.

The political interpretations and implications of the New Testament - including the gospels and letters and presumed actions of Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth - have been largely left unstudied. The majority of New Testament and Christian Origins scholars assert that Paul was not political, but theological, that Paul was concerned with matters of the next world rather than this one, and that Paul conveniently fits into imperial structures and ideology. Most scholars have painted a picture of Jesus as a successful, well-educated man who challenged Jewish hierarchy but was supportive of the Roman order. Many Christian congregations believe that Christianity was always the religion of the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire itself was benevolent, and there existed no conflict of interest when Constantine made the empire Christian. In recent decades, however, some scholars - in particular Richard Horsley, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and John Dominic Crossan - have begun to look at early "Christianity" as a transformative and counter-imperial movement.

These scholars and their published books such as Crossan's, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Horsley's, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, and Schüssler Fiorenza's, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, describe the early Christian movement - called the Jesus Movement, the *basileia* movement, or Christ Cults by different scholars - as a social movement to transform the violent and impoverishing empire into an egalitarian society. Although they differ in their approach and findings, each contributes to a fuller understanding of early Christianity as a social movement developing from the subjected nations and people of the Roman Empire. This scholarship not only proposes new insights about Christian history and the historical Jesus or Paul, but also suggests a new paradigm in reading and interpreting the New Testament. This new paradigm breaks from traditional interpretation that has been used to maintain the status quo. Instead, this new paradigm sees the early counter-imperial Christian movement as parallel to a growing social movement to

end poverty and oppression, led by the poor and oppressed today. In fact, the poor of all ages, races, genders and nationalities living in the United States, inspired by Jesus and the books of the New Testament, are using the scholarship of Crossan, Horsley and Schüssler Fiorenza, as well as their own counter-imperial New Testament interpretations, in their struggle against violence, deprivation, and subjugation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Richard Horsley and John Dominic Crossan have insisted on looking at the historical context of Jesus and Paul in order to understand their ministries and message more clearly and to see their words and actions in a counter-imperial light. In fact in his book, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (2003), Horsley asserts, "Trying to understand Jesus' speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States" (13).

Richard Horsley details the Roman imperial system at length in his edited volume, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Horsley and the other authors in *Paul and Empire* describe the Roman Imperial Cult and thereby the worship of Caesar as divine and divine son, savior of Rome, bearer of peace, and great benefactor as the historical context of Jesus and Paul (11-12). Horsley writes that the Imperial Cult was fused with the patronage system where imperial priests provided necessities and gifts to the community, that the community came to rely on, at the same time as the priests controlled the religious system of sacrifices and the political administration for Rome. This system of patronage integrated the whole empire on the model of the patriarchal family with Augustus at the top. This patronage system served to humiliate those dependent on the resources of the wealthy to survive (88-95). "The closely interrelated issues and selections in...the emperor cult and the imperial patronage system offer both what appears to have been the principal networks by which Roman imperial power relations were constituted and a significant broadening of our understanding of how power relations are constituted in political-religious and social-economic forms" (3). Imperial Cult and patronage expressed the imperial household structure and helped maintain the empire.

Looking at the social (religious), political and economic order of the Roman Empire that Horsley lays out in this book, there are uncanny parallels to the "American" system today. The

United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is experiencing a tremendous polarization between wealth and poverty; wars are cropping up across the globe in the name of peace and liberty; and more and more people see the United States poised like Rome was two thousand years ago. The political and economic situation described by Horsley resembles the military, economic, and political systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What Horsley lays out in the chapters on patronage and benefaction in the Ancient Mediterranean bears resemblance to philanthropy and the social service system currently. Horsley's book can be used to study the parallels between these two time periods and analyze the systems of power and hegemony in the Roman Empire. It also offers a methodology for analyzing systems of power and dominance that is greatly needed by those engaged in a social movement to change the conditions that are disempowering and impoverishing them.

John Dominic Crossan has also engaged in attempts to study and reconstruct the Roman imperial system, particularly the social and economic position of Jesus and Paul in the first century of the Common Era. Crossan's book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, attempts to show the social, political and economic structures of especially first century Galilee. In the Introduction to this book, Crossan writes, "If, for example, we are tempted to describe Jesus as a literate middle-class carpenter, cross-cultural anthropology reminds us that there was no middle class in ancient societies and that peasants are usually illiterate, so how could Jesus become what never existed at his time?" (xii). Instead, Crossan asserts, "If Jesus was a carpenter, therefore, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degradeds or Expendables...Furthermore, since between 95 and 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate at the time of Jesus, it must be presumed that Jesus also was illiterate... like the vast majority of his contemporaries" (25).

Crossan states in his book that Jesus stood for a Kingdom/Empire/Realm of God that challenged the very foundations of the Roman Empire. He asserts that God's kingdom is made up of those completely expendable and excluded from society; "In any situation of oppression, especially in those oblique, indirect, and systemic ones where injustice wears a mask of normalcy or even of necessity, the only ones who are innocent or blessed are those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system's own evil operations. A contemporary equivalent: only the homeless are innocent" (62). Crossan writes that Jesus stood for a "radical egalitarianism" that included people of all

classes, status, abilities, etc. For this, Crossan describes that Jesus was called 'a glutton and a drunkard' by his contemporaries. He writes that Jesus practiced an open commensuality - he invited the poor and maimed to banquets, pronounced that all foods were considered clean.

Jesus' radical egalitarianism applied to his healings as well. Crossan interprets Jesus' healings and even the resurrection of Lazarus to apply to many in Galilee, beyond just the example of the healed leper or Lazarus himself. This type of social healing signals that Jesus and the Jesus movement were concerned with improving the lives of the poor and infirm during the first century CE. The concern for improvement of earthly conditions for the oppressed is still true today; "The case of the Galilean leper shows us how an action performed on one single body reaches out to become an action performed on society at large...For John's gospel, the process of general resurrection is incarnated in the event of Lazarus's resuscitation. That is one such movement from process to event. But I can imagine peasants all over Lower Galilee who would have said with equal intensity that Jesus brought life out of death and would not have been thinking of the heavenly future but the earthly present" (94-95).

The very notion that Jesus, as divine and divine son, was a poor, illiterate peasant is empowering to poor people today. Crossan's anthropological work on the social setting of the ancient Mediterranean, and his inclusion of Jesus in that poverty and misery is a powerful counter to contemporary society's attempt to blame poverty on poor people. His work challenges the notion of the culture of poverty and the underclass, where poor people are understood to have no agency, and where people are assumed to be poor because they are sinners and have no relationship with God. Crossan's work on the historical Jesus asserts that the poor and excluded have a special relationship with God because of Jesus' life situation.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza starts off her book, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* with the assertion, "If Jesus...were to return to earth, read all his biographies, and attend the Jesus Seminar or the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, he also would marvel and ask with amazement: 'Who is this person they are talking about?'" (1). Fiorenza speaks of Jesus and then Mary Magdalene with humor and insight, "Would she not be puzzled that scholars attribute only to Jesus and not to his companions a movement that they had together envisioned - an egalitarian movement of Divine Wisdom for the healing of the downtrodden, an

inclusive community of those who are powerless in the eyes of the mighty?" (2). Current scholarship by Joanne Grant, Barbara Ransby, John D'emilio and David Garrow about Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin and other behind-the-scenes but important leaders in the Civil Rights Movement echoes the second statement of Schüssler Fiorenza. In recent biographies of Civil Rights leaders, scholars are writing that the famous names including Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy were just a few of the people who envisioned and carried out the local work of ending segregation and discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s. This scholarship is pointing out the limitation of crediting only one charismatic leader for the social program and reform of an era and movement. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza demonstrates that this pattern dates back at least until Jesus. In fact, she writes, "I have suggested in my own work that Historical-Jesus research should replace this 'realist' narrative of the Historical-Jesus as the great charismatic individual with the category of memory" (7). She then argues that we should replace our understanding of the "Historical-Jesus" as an "exceptional man and charismatic leader" to an emancipatory Divine Wisdom movement of which Jesus the human being was a part.

Fiorenza points out that while scholars have studied modern social movements, social movements of antiquity have been left unstudied. When looking at such movements as Jewish apocalypticism, Historical-Jesus scholars have not focused on its "collective emancipatory aspects" (24). She understands Jesus as "a member of a variegated Jewish *basileia* movement that stood in conflict with the hegemonic kyriarchal structures of the Roman empires, of which hegemonic Judaism also was a part" (40). She writes that current scholars also tend to spiritualize the socio-economic context of Jesus' actions and sayings which in turn makes the *basileia* of God, "pie in the sky" rather than a social movement to achieve equality and dignity for all on earth in the present.

The purpose of Fiorenza's scholarship is to be accountable to the new social movements that are springing up today and to draw lessons from the emancipatory struggles of the historical Jesus for such movements today. The *basileia* movement proposed an alternative structure, a non-hierarchal one that blamed the Roman hierarchy and subjugation for the problems in society, not the subjugated themselves. She asserts that this historical movement was not simply anti-imperial, but stood for a transformative mutual community that was a viable alternative to empire. It is this egalitarian society modeled by the early

Christians that serves to inspire the poor who are organizing in the US to build a movement to end poverty.

There is an important and productive synergy between the scholarship of Horsley, Crossan and Schüssler Fiorenza (even as these scholars differ and debate among themselves) and a developing movement to end poverty today. Those engaged in counter-imperial New Testament scholarship and those inspired by the New Testament and Jesus and Paul themselves to build a social movement have much to learn from each other. Horsley has pointed out a methodology of critiquing the power structure of the Roman Empire and drawing parallels with injustice and exclusion today. Crossan has put Jesus and Paul in their historical context, demonstrating the moral agency of those most affected by imperialism and poverty. Schüssler Fiorenza has demonstrated the egalitarian communities established by the early "Christians", and challenged the dangerous model of the charismatic leader of historic and contemporary social movements. Each of these lessons is needed for a social movement of the oppressed to continue to grow.

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