

Richard A. Horsley, ed. *Christian Origins. A People's History of Christianity*, vol. 1. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. Pp. xviii + 318. ISBN: 080063411X. \$35.00 USD.

1. The seven-volume series *A People's History of Christianity* (general editor Denis R. Janz of Loyola University, New Orleans) is dedicated to the approximately ninety-five percent of Christians that traditional church history remains silent about. According to its title, the first volume of this innovative series, edited by Richard A. Horsley of the University of Massachusetts, specializes on 'Christian Origins', that is, in other words, the New Testament period. In twelve chapters grouped in three major units some distinguished scholars acclaimed for their previous occupation with socio-historical issues of early Christianity attempt to paint a realistic picture of those common Christians who are usually neglected by church history, their lives and living conditions, their world of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. In most instances this task is performed in an impressively successful way, in a few others serious doubts persist as to whether the focus is not too narrow and the conclusions and findings are really representative of the people, the time and the area they lived in. Therefore, these and other minor methodological inconsistencies should initiate further reflection for the volumes to follow and, possibly, for updated and enlarged editions of this and the other volumes of the series that will certainly come. Nonetheless, this (project in general and its) first volume in particular is to be welcomed and its contributors must be thanked for their ambition to find answers to questions such as: Who were the first Christians? How did they live and worship?

2. General editor Denis R. Janz's 'Foreword' opens the volume by defining the understanding of a 'people's history', providing the overall rationale of the whole series (xiii-xv). Volume editor Richard A. Horsley further specifies in his introduction what has been previously delineated in the foreword (pp. 1-20). He utilizes tables to illustrate the striking differences between a 'people's history' and 'standard history' (p. 5) and sketches the overall story of early Christianity within the Roman Empire. However, not every contribution sticks to the programmatic policy he formulates at the end of the introductory chapter (p. 20): "Since our purpose is to explore the development of particular communities or movements, as well as key social forms and factors and modes of communication involved in most of them, we do not emphasize particular methods or models. Our approaches are eclectically multidisciplinary and self-consciously critical when adapting a given method for a particular purpose."

3. Each of the three major parts of the book contains four contributions. The first one, 'Early Jesus Movements', starts with Horsley's 'Jesus Movement and the Renewal of Israel' (pp. 23-46), which immediately begins with the claim that "Middle Eastern peasants who formed the first movement that focused on Yeshua bar Yosef (whom we know as Jesus) eked out a living farming and fishing in a remote region of the Roman Empire" without distinct reference to a known source. This and similar statements, also in the second chapter 'Why Peasants Responded to Jesus' by William R. Herzog II (pp. 47-70), convey the generalized impression of an early Christianity consisting purely of people from a specific class and origin. Herzog then deals with the Judean and Galilean society and basically distinguishes between only two social dichotomies, 'the rich' and 'the poor'. One may wonder what to do then with other followers of Jesus, for instance, with Joseph of Arimathea. Be that as it may, such a critique may appear as a kind of pedantry, above all because Horsley's depiction of the early Jesus movements – in principle, Horsley employs Mark and Q as sources – is adequate and sound and Herzog's focus on Jesus and the peasants of his time provides some interesting ideas about Jesus and his followers that may provoke further discussion. It is natural that a 'people's history' must also focus on 'women's history', because women played a significant role in the Gospels and in early Christianity. Thus, Antoinette Clark Wire develops a perspective on 'Women's History from

Birth-Prophecy Stories' (71-93), in which she traces the (oral) tradition of such stories (mainly in ancient Israel). In addition, Barbara R. Rossing writes about 'Prophets, Prophetic Movements, and the Voices of Women' (pp. 261-86), which forms chapter twelve and is found under the heading of the third major unit of studies ('Social Patterns and Practices'). Both contributions (Rossing's could also have been put immediately after Clark Wire's) assert that a 'women's history', which can be both the study of the history of women and/or the perspective of women on history, is pivotal to a successful investigation into early Christianity. Recent publications have shown that the accumulation and assessment of relevant data (archaeological findings in general and papyri in particular) are not only indispensable for writing a 'women's history' but also bring forth striking and at the same time realistic insights into the lives of women in (late) antiquity.¹ The fourth and final study of the first unit is Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley's 'Turning the Tables on Jesus: The Mandaean View' (pp. 94-109). The attentive reader may ask here why the Mandaeans are selected from a pool of groups somehow linked with Christianity in its very early days; but Buckley answers this (and other questions) at once. He writes that the Mandaeans are the only group "that still survives" and points to "Iran and Iraq, where they continue to survive under increasing political pressure" (p. 94). With his concise depiction of the Mandaeans, their origins and background, and their major prophet John the Baptist, Buckley offers an interesting view on a group that is usually not treated in a church history, at least not in an unbiased way.

4. Part two of the book, i.e., the next unit of four studies, is dedicated to 'Cities and Texts'. Here one feature of this collection of essays becomes apparent: the twelve contributions do not add up to an overall presentation of 'Christian Origins' in respect of a 'people's history'; they are more or less highlighting specific issues, or, in other words, they exemplify certain aspects of people's lives in the New Testament period. Ray Pickett specializes on 'Conflicts at Corinth' (pp. 113-37), Warren Carter focuses on 'Matthew's People' (pp. 138-61), Allen Dwight Callahan reads 'The Gospel of John as People's History' (pp. 162-76), and Neil Elliott writes about strategies of 'Disciplining the Hope of the Poor in Ancient Rome' (177-97). Of course, other Gospels could have served as the starting point for an investigation like that performed by Carter, and other early Christian communities really had similar conflicts to solve as was the case in Corinth. Occasionally, the repetition of methodological reflections and discussions appears redundant and overdone. After having read Janz's foreword and Horsley's introduction the reader should have understood the overall approach in principle. Thus, such tiring redundancy could have been avoided (see, for example, Elliott's somewhat long-winded explanation of the method applied at the very beginning of his essay, pp. 177-81).

5. The third part of the book, 'Social Patterns and Practices', again offers appealing insights into people's lives in (late) antiquity. Carolyn Osiek, who has intensely worked on house churches and households, tackles the issue of 'Family Matters' (pp. 201-20). Her study is a good example of those essays that directly and immediately address their topic. Clarice J. Martin took over the task of describing the matter of slavery in the New Testament period, which is, without any doubt, apt for understanding specific Biblical passages and the socio-cultural setting they are embedded into. Her 'The Eyes Have It: Slaves in the Communities of Christ-Believers' (pp. 221-39) specializes on slaves' use of their bodies, above all, their eyes, "to serve the political and survivalist interests of deference, desire, and resistance" (p. 223). Steven J. Friesen writes about the problem poverty might have caused in early Christian (or proto-Christian) communities. How

¹ See, for instance, R.S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 B.C.-A.D. 800*. With contributions by Evie Ahtaridis. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

did early Christians tackle the issue of inequality or, to be more precise, the issue of an unequal distribution of goods and resources? What role did God play then? Friesen's 'Injustice of God's Will: Explanations of Poverty in Proto-Christian Communities' (pp. 240-60) is a fine socio-cultural study of the living conditions and the economic situation in the Roman Empire. The final chapter 'Prophets, Prophetic Movements, and the Voices of Women' by Barabara R. Rossing has already been addressed earlier in this review.

6. The book comes with a list of abbreviations (pp. 287-88), an individual section with footnotes that are not printed at the bottom of the pages throughout the whole book (pp. 289-312), and a general index (pp. 313-18) that should have offered more details and keywords than is actually the case. Furthermore, there are splendid illustrations and photographs of archaeological objects, maps, and even colour plates in order to visualize the world the contributors write about (for a list, see xi-xii), although these visualizations do not always immediately correspond to the issues addressed in the essays. Some sidebars provide restricted but precise background information.

7. To write a 'people's history of Christianity' is a demanding task, and the contributors to the first volume have successfully avoided the pitfalls such a project brings with it: they definitely refer to relevant ancient sources for their conclusions and never lose their perspective, i.e., they (almost) always focus on the common people. Nevertheless, volume one of this series evidently offers a restricted view on people and their lives in the New Testament period. All the contributors belong to a North American setting (although Allen Dwight Callahan is teaching in Bahia, Brazil) and, thus, may unconsciously tend to evaluate data, interpret sources, and draw conclusions against exactly such a background. It would have been interesting to read what a church historian from another continent, for instance, from Asia or Africa, might have to say about this or that issue. Maybe his or her attitude towards some socio-cultural aspects would have been more unpretentious, or maybe it would have been less so. Leaving these minor points of criticism aside, the series has made a good start with this first volume and is very welcome. It is to be hoped that the complete seven-volume set will be available soon. Only then can a complete assessment of the methodological approach and its application to different topics *and* periods of time be carried out in an adequate way.

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