



## **Review of Richard A. Horsley, *You Shall Not Bow Down and Serve Them: The Political Economic Projects of Jesus and Paul*, Wipf and Stock 2022, 244 pp.**

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One of the major themes in Richard A. Horsley's extensive body of scholarship has been the intersection of politics, economics, and biblical studies. *You Shall Not Bow Down and Serve Them: The Political Economic Projects of Jesus and Paul* offers an accessible introduction to Horsley's work as well as a clear vision of the Bible as a site of collective action in order to inspire reflection and action about contemporary realities of economic inequality and injustice. "Once it is recognized that biblical texts portray collective action to resist domination and exploitation under a sequence of historical empires, then it seems more appropriate to consider critically what course of action might be taken to resist the more complex and pervasive domination and exploitation under the empire of global capitalism" (17).

*You Shall Not Bow Down* is divided into four parts. Part 1: Economic Justice in the Bible, reworks a 2015 article in *Interpretation* to argue that throughout the Bible (Horsley means here the texts of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), there is a consistent if complex portrayal of God's concern for economic justice and of opposition to rulers and systems that exploit God's people. Economic justice is valued from the legal texts of the Torah, to the condemnation of rulers and elites prevalent especially in the prophetic tradition, to the reformist vein exemplified by the portrayal of Samuel in Kings. Horsley also acknowledges texts which seem to offer divine blessing for structural injustice, although he notes that this is not a dominant strand. Likewise, Horsley describes the Gospels as portraying Jesus and his followers in Galilee as a renewal movement centered in economic justice in opposition to Roman rulers and their representatives.

Part 2: The Political Economic Project of Jesus vs. the Roman Imperial Order, begins with two brief chapters situating the political-religious-economic context of Roman Palestine, including the largely agrarian village economy, the establishment of the temple state, the Hasmonean dynasty, and Roman imperial rule. Horsley notes two very important themes: First, since there can be no separation of religion from political-economic realities, the gospels need to be situated within those complex and interwoven contexts. Second, the political-religious-economic context of the Gospels is dominated by empire. There is both increasing interference, military intervention, and economic exploitation from imperial regimes as well

as pockets of independence, resistance, and increasingly widespread revolt (57). The latter two chapters of Part 2 focus on Jesus and the disciples in opposition to the Roman imperial order. Horsley argues that Jesus's teachings call for a renewal of Mosaic covenant religious-social-economic relationships in villages. Horsley also argues that the Gospels present Jesus resisting the rulers of Israel who were appointed and backed by the Romans because of their participation in economic extraction of the people through the temple-state economy. Horsley criticizes Christian theological schematizing of anti-scribe, anti-Pharisee, anti-priest rhetoric in the gospels, instead focusing on the gospel writers' portrayal of figures as representatives of imperially sanctioned economic extraction; in this argument, Jesus's demonstration in the temple looms large.

In Part 3: Paul and Political Economy: An Alternative Society of Local Communities among Peoples Subject to Rome, Horsley turns to the letters of Paul. In the first two chapters of this section, Horsley offers additional context for the Roman economy at large as well as localized data about cities in the first century CE. He focuses on the ubiquity of slavery, the increasing popularity of the imperial cult, the emergence of associations, and the relatively rapid geographic expansion of the renewal movement in Judea to cities in Syria and Asia Minor. In the third chapter of this section, Horsley examines the letters of Paul not as systematic theology but as occasional letters, addressing ad hoc communities of Christ followers. He contends that Paul imagined these local assemblies as part of an alternative society of shared resources and communal meals following a different Lord than the imperial Caesar. Notably, he also contends that while "the 'canonical Paul' has been understood as an advocate of slavery" (143), "we can assume, but cannot know for sure, that he had in mind that slavery would be terminated along with the whole dominant imperial 'world that was passing away'" (147).

Part 4: The Bible and the New Form of Empire, turns to the contemporary economic moment of global capitalism, and argues for the relevance of both biblical studies and the Bible as resources for thinking about capitalism. In the first chapter in this section, Horsley traces the historical developments of the emergence of global capitalism, which he calls a new form of empire, with unprecedented global reach over both people and the environment. He also describes the emergence of biblical studies as an academic discipline, emerging from a division of Christian theology "on the basis of and as an expression of western European bourgeois culture" (164), and its diversification in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century through expanded and alternative forms of scholarship. Horsley notes that these shifts led to additional focus on the imperial context of the emergence of the New Testament, as well as the legacies of interpretation of the Bible in service of imperializing Western projects and in resistance to such projects. In the last two chapters, Horsley models "how biblical scholarship might try to stop facilitating global capitalism," asking, if it is not possible "in current circumstances not to be *in* the new Empire, might it be possible for biblical scholarship not to be *of* the Empire?" (172). In these concluding chapters, he returns to the texts of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to help imagine alternatives to the current order.

In my teaching work, I regularly teach a class on Economic Justice and the Bible, and regularly include a week on economic themes in my introductory classes in New Testament. Omitting the economic context of the New Testament in introductory classes gives students an incomplete view of the political and religious contexts from which the texts of the New Testament emerge. Horsley's book is particularly useful for teaching because of its clear writing, concise argument, and careful if insistent claims about the importance of economic (in)justice in biblical texts. Horsley is one of the earliest (and remains one of the few) scholars exploring politics, economics, and religion in biblical studies not as separate themes but as co-constitutive realities of the ancient world. Our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world and the texts of the New Testament is often hampered by scholarly modernist separations of these categories, and *You Shall Not Bow Down* models the benefits of treating religion, politics, and economics as inseparable.

*You Shall Not Bow Down* will also, I imagine, find an audience in churches and other faith-based non-profit and advocacy contexts where communities are trying to address economic injustice today. Horsley seems deeply invested in how communities that make meaning with biblical texts might find alternative possibilities and imagine better worlds because of their engagement with the Bible. "Covenanting communities that would support one another in withdrawing from serving global capital or more seriously resisting its operations already exist in churches, synagogues, mosques, certain community organizations, certain civil society groups, and of course labor unions and credit unions, and here and there local government" (199). The final chapters of the book invite communities to do this kind of work, fueled by Horsley's scholarship and better historical awareness about the ancient Mediterranean world.

Because of Horsley's significant scholarly influence, I would have appreciated additional engagement with recent scholarship that helps nuance our understandings of the ancient economy and early Christ communities. G. Anthony Keddie's *Class and Power in Roman Palestine* (2019) engages deeply with material evidence to explore some of the economic structures, including taxation and land tenancy, which shaped the economy of Roman Palestine. I wonder how Horsley would respond to Keddie's attention to issues of class while adopting a more subtle description of economic extraction during the period? Horsley takes great care to push back against later, Christianizing anti-Jewish readings built upon criticisms of Pharisees, scribes, and the priestly class while holding on to the role of rhetorical critique of those with economic power. I wonder if Keddie's institutional approach would also help counteract Christianizing anti-Jewish interpretive lenses.

Similarly, Horsley addresses slavery in the New Testament by arguing that Paul has been misread as an advocate of slavery even as Paul regularly uses language of slavery theologically and advocates a kind of stasis for enslaved persons while awaiting an anticipated return of Christ. A variety of scholars across the theological and methodological spectrum have taken a more complicated view of enslavement in the letters of Paul. Horsley's argument here seems inclined to rescue Paul in service of the larger argument of the book. Feminist

scholars such as Melanie Johnson DeBaufre and Laura Nasrallah (2011) have encouraged us to look beyond the heroic Paul, and to give attention to those marginalized persons in the letters who might also be sources for theological imaginaries. One does not need to rescue Paul to find alternative models to imperial extraction and enslavement in the earliest Christ communities. As Katherine Shaner (2018) has argued, enslaved persons are in leadership in the Pauline communities, and minimizing the importance of slavery in the letters of Paul misses the opportunity to learn from enslaved persons who are living, through mutual aid and support, in resistance of the imperial, extractive, enslaving economy. Horsley's important larger points about early Christ communities, particularly their pooling of resources and proximity to ancient associations, would only be strengthened by addressing slavery by looking to the people beside Paul.

Horsley's work has and will continue to influence biblical scholarship at the intersections of economics, politics, and religion. *You Shall Not Bow Down* has something to offer readers who have long engaged with Horsley's work as well as readers who are encountering his scholarship for the first time. Anyone interested in the intersections of economics and religion in biblical texts should read Horsley's work, especially this important contribution.

## References

- Johnson-DeBaufre, Melanie, and Laura S. Nasrallah. 2011. "Beyond the Heroic Paul: Toward a Feminist and Decolonizing Approach to the Letters." In *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, edited by Christopher D. Stanley, 161-74. Minneapolis: Fortress.
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- Shaner, Katherine A. 2018. *Enslaved Leadership in Early Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press.