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# Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts. AND Jesus and the Peasants

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## Book Review

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

K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, eds. Second Edition

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008

### **Jesus and the Peasants**

Douglas E. Oakman

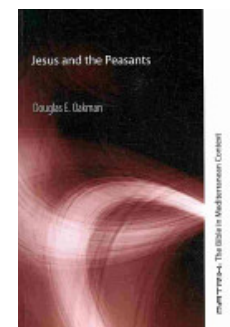
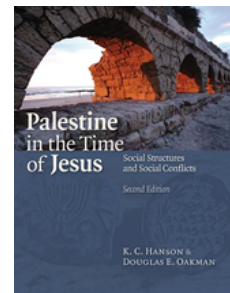
Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008

Originally I committed to reviewing the updated version of the Hanson-Oakman text *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*. However, given that Douglas Oakman's *Jesus and the Peasants* appeared this year as well and proved to be a compelling companion to the former work, I felt a dual review to be in order.

The latter work is a collection of essays grounded in the politics and economy of Galilee as overshadowed by the imperial elitist alliance of Roman political might and its Herodian and high priestly clients. Oakman takes us through an agrarian culture brutalized by debt and injustice due to a multiple tax system that crushed the peasants and their villages while sucking up their land and drawing it into urban and Mediterranean commerce. Although the book chapters are essentially pieces strung together and although there is no smooth flow from chapter to chapter, the articles cluster together around two main themes: (1) the structures and workings of the political economy which shaped peasant life and Jesus' ministry and (2) a reconstruction of the historical Jesus and the early Jesus Movement by an examination of specific texts. I found *Jesus and the Peasants* both brilliant and inspiring – superb scholarship and a call to faithful activism – whether that be Oakman's intent or not.

I cite a handful of examples to demonstrate how Oakman renders visceral and concrete certain Biblical references that most of us pass over far too lightly. He deals with money and its role in the economy in numerous pieces, and by way of example his "The Buying Power of Two Denarii" provides intricate detail on the buying power of this ancient coinage, thus providing clarity on those passages in the New Testament where the denarius coin is cited. By so doing he demonstrates just how precarious life proved for the peasants of Jesus' milieu. In another chapter ("How Large Is a 'Great Crowd,' Mark 6:34") Oakman deals with the demography of Roman-controlled Palestine (city, town, village, etc.) showing that the gathering of such groups around Jesus demonstrated just how dangerous his ministry was to the established power of Rome and its collaborationist clients. As one final example, the author's reflections on the mustard seed imagery reveal how subversive this usage was from the tongue of Jesus the tax-resister.

Meanwhile, Fortress Press' re-edition of *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* is a must for the library of all who take New Testament scholarship seriously. Indeed, I am convinced that it



should be a required text in every New Testament introduction course, both undergraduate and graduate. After dealing with methodological concerns, the authors proceed to describe family structures and power relationships in early first century C. E. Palestine. Nor are these social hierarchies presented simply in static form; the dynamic of protest and struggle also emerge in their descriptions. Debt and agrarian-based commerce are displayed in detail, and we are treated to the multi-faceted role played by the Jerusalem Temple and the resistance of the Jesus Movement to its power and economic muscle. The genius of this work combines: (1) a scholarly thoroughness; (2) a simple, easy-to-understand style; and (3) excellent use of charts and diagrams.

I applaud and recommend highly both these works. Palestine in the Time of Jesus has no competitor, as far as this reviewer is concerned. It serves as a foundation for any serious effort to understand Jesus and his peasant movement, and for persons of faith it renders Jesus' incarnation serious and historical. The reader can be grateful that s/he will find no abstracted Jesus in either of these two works. Add Doug Oakman's *Jesus and the Peasants*, and I am convinced that we have in these two fine works books that stand tall alongside the fine scholarship of John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley and William Herzog II.

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