



PROJECT MUSE®

Class Struggle in the New Testament ed. by Robert J. Myles
(review)

Christopher Hrynkow

The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Volume 82, Number 1, January 2021, pp.
178-180 (Review)



Published by The Catholic University of America Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/781585>

and their own lives to actualize its meaning. Alison Hari-Singh (“Bhakti, Sadhu Sundar Singh, and the Art of Reading Scripture: An Indian Approach to Reading the Bible in Canada”) looks to the example of Sadhu Sundar Singh, an Indian Christian mystic, as one who incorporated the Hindu notion of bhakti, surrender or union, in his approach to Christian faith. Singh called for a life of prayer, meditation on biblical texts, and service as Christian reading practices that related to the “nobler elements of Hindu religion” (p. 91). Such an approach offers an alternative to Western epistemologies. The final case study is “First Peoples, Narrative, and Bible Translation,” by Ray Aldred and Catherine Aldred-Shull, who argue that translations based in the perspective of the recipient people are a necessity for “people to be who God created them to be” (p. 107). In the case of Canadian Indigenous peoples, such a translation would take into account “indigenous understandings of story and oral narrative memory” (p. 106).

The response essays recognize the “groundbreaking” character of this book (pp. 115, 121, 122). Gosnell L. Yorke writes, in “Visible but Voiceless Minorities No More: New Reading of the Bible in Canada,” that these six essays consider the communities from which the writers come, and their work will contribute to “the Canadian multi-cultural Christian discourse,” which includes “new and creative readings of the Bible” (p. 121). Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng agrees. In “As One Minoritized Reader to Another: Engaging Biblical Hermeneutics in Canada in the Twenty-First Century—A Critical Response,” she closes with important questions about where this work will take biblical scholars, particularly as they engage with their own communities of faith and others, and with the academic study of hermeneutics.

This volume is well worth the read by any Canadian observer of religion, and for anyone interested in how the Bible is read in minority communities of faith. The writers engage their own contexts and a broader hermeneutical literature in ways that will make this an important volume for future studies.

Jo-Ann Badley, Ambrose University, Calgary, AB T3H 5R3, Canada

ROBERT J. MYLES (ed.), *Class Struggle in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019). Pp. xvi + 282. \$115.

As introduced by the editor’s “Class Struggle in the New Testament!,” this collection seeks to contribute to the revitalization of class as an analytical prism in biblical studies. Myles understands “class” as relational struggle over resources, ideas, and power. He continues that, despite its roots in industrializing contexts, placing class struggle at the center retains explanatory power for studying an antiquity marked by wealthy landowners extracting significant surpluses by, for example, the ownership of land and slaves and via the exploitation of peasants and artisans.

Activating such explanatory power, “Jesus, the Temple, and the Crowd: A Way Less Traveled,” by Neil Elliott, departs from Gospel renderings that place an individualist adult Jesus in the temple; the accommodationist nature of these texts obscures Roman complicity in Jesus’s death. Alternatively, Elliott proposes that Jesus chose the temple as a focal point for an objectively unsuccessful collective action because it was a symbolic, attention-

grabbing location, much like the National Mall in 1968. The historical crowd, inclusive of Jesus, is thus presented as turbulent and riotous, in the empowering sense of rationally claiming space in the face of oppression.

Christopher B. Zeichmann's contribution, "Romans Go Home? The Military as a Site of Class Struggle in the Roman East and the New Testament," unpacks the complex socioeconomic statuses in play in the imperial forces in Jesus's context. Readers learn that the military in the Roman East was largely recruited locally. The lower classes and marginalized groups, including Syrians, most often filled the ranks in Judea, where Jews and gentiles served together. The conditions of service were quite harsh, bordering on those experienced by slaves. Even basic rations (contrary to Paul's supposition), clothing, and equipment were deducted from a soldier's pay. This reality incentivized corruption and could further push lower socioeconomic-status people who were ex-military into becoming brigands.

Alan H. Cadwallader's "Peasant Plucking in Mark: Conceptual and Material Issues" continues adding nuance to categories that can problematically be assumed in biblical readings and scholarship. Specifically, Cadwallader paints a picture of differentiated, meaning-making peasant cultures that include significant degrees of variability in their socioeconomic operations on land and sea. Somewhat off-theme, Robyn Faith Walsh's "IVDAEA DEVICTA: The Gospels as Imperial 'Captive Literature'" argues that NT writing is largely not oriented toward Christian communities but properly situated within conventions current in elite Greco-Roman literature. These features, Walsh adds, do not necessarily mean that Paul and the Gospel writers are upper class themselves only that they are engaging this milieu, perhaps in attempt to secure patronage or increase social capital.

A solid chapter by Myles follows, "Fishing for Entrepreneurs in the Sea of Galilee? Unmasking Neoliberal Ideology in Biblical Interpretation." He challenges readers to consider how classist assumptions, including those circulating around capitalist individualism, serve to downplay the struggle between exploitative classes and Jesus's social peers. For Myles, this struggle is hiding in plain sight in the Gospel narratives. A telling example is offered in the peasant-aligned fishers' following of Jesus. Their actions may owe much more to the revolt-inspiring oppressive conditions prevalent around the Sea of Galilee than to an entrepreneurial choice. "Hand of the Master: Of Slaveholders and the Slave-Relation," by Roland Boer and Christina Petterson presents evidence that Paul and the early Christians owned slaves and benefited from slave labor. The authors suggest that Pauline writings' invocations of slave imagery actually represent an attempt to resolve the contradiction on an ideological level, pointing back to how it remained unresolved in practice.

Comparably disrupting what he characterizes as leftist readings that ignore the hierarchy of early Christian group formation, Bruce Worthington's "Populist Features in the Gospel of Matthew" reads Jesus and his followers as a part of a populist movement, specifically, one that was anti-institutionalist and viewed itself as "*a part that was the whole*" (pp. 162–63). Another disruption is offered by Sarah E. Rollens's reflections on "Troubling the Retainer Class in Antiquity." She argues that "retainer class" is generally too focused on the economic position of middling groups' collaborations with and perpetuation of elites' position. This obscures the complex and multidirectional social, political, and economic relationships in play. As an alternative, Rollens proposes "mediating stratum" or "semi-political mediators" as providing more content and meaning to a grouping that would have most likely included the Gospel writers.

For its part, Taylor Weaver's "On Rethinking Pauline Gift and Social Functions: Class Struggle in Early Christianity?" affirms the value of considering Paul's treatment of gift beyond its theologized functions for what it reveals about wider economic and political struggles in his time. Weaver proposes that Paul disrupts the established norms of gifting and benefice by augmenting and withdrawing them in various ways. The results, he continues, thus fracture an element of the social concord that supported privilege, via activating the dynamics of class struggle.

Dean Galbraith's "The Origin of Archangels: Ideological Mystification of Nobility" considers archangels' appearance around the third century B.C.E. under conditions of empire. He concludes that the specific naming of archangels in that context is a transference that harks back to and develops Judahite heroic ideology of royalty and nobility, thus, legitimating an elite class of nobles. Galbraith argues that this style of legitimization of class difference continues into the NT writings, with Christians represented as taking on, or even surpassing, the archangels' vice-regent roles in the kingdom of God.

The last chapter, "Christian Origins and the Specter of Class: Locating Class Struggle in the New Testament Today," is a short piece written by the noted biblical scholar James G. Crossley. In a fitting conclusion, he offers a survey of the resurgence of class analysis in biblical scholarship in conversation with the contributions in this volume. In the process, he problematizes the efficacy of popular anti-imperial scholarship as too easily absorbed back into neoliberal behaviors. Crossley ends by proposing that the significance of class analysis will hinge on the agency of an emerging generation of biblical scholars much more familiar with the precarity of employment in a neoliberal age than their comfortable tenured mentors.

The volume as a whole delivers on its potential by opening up important lines of argument, recovery, and interpretation that come into focus through the prism of class. There is also a great deal of interaction with primary and secondary literatures, much of which is done well even if individual chapters sometimes conclude abruptly. As such, this collection will be a welcome addition to academic libraries.

Christopher Hrynko, St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0W6, Canada