

Class Struggle in the New Testament

By Robert J. Myles et al.
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.

Class Struggle in the New Testament is a collection of essays by various authors including Dr. Robert J Myles, who also served as editor. Each contributor explores different passages and/or aspects of class in the first century. Myles himself describes this collective work as "... an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the class struggle refracted through pages of the New Testament writings" (p. xv). As the work approaches the subject matter through a multiplicity of perspectives it successfully rouses further debate.

The touchstone for this work seems to be expressed by Myles, in the first chapter, wherein he invokes the observations of Norman Gottwald to argue that in the study of ancient times, class is an important and often overlooked interpretive category. He has a point. The essays compiled in this work, presented from a distinctly Marxist vantage, serve as fertile ground for discussion and thus perhaps serve well as, "...a broader effort to reinvigorate an exploration of class and class struggle within the study of the New Testament and its world" (p. 2).

Fun, right? Indeed, how often does one, living in a staunch capitalist society choose to wrestle with such ideas? For example, the book's contributors help the reader to understand that the principles of business within a capitalistic society create tension between the bourgeoisie (ownership) and the proletariat (common labor), therein fostering economic value in its wake. In short, a trade of grief for gold. This book's contributors are not seeking to impose the precepts of industrial capitalism on the ancient agrarian world but does see analogous elements in the tension between ancient class groups that allow some to profit from the suffering of others - slavery for example. In short, this book offers a unique lens with which to view the ancient world of the New Testament and inspires further exploration.

Before I touch on some of the inspiring points of this work, it should be noted that Dr. Robert J. Myles, the contributing editor, is suitably qualified to facilitate such conversations. Myles holds a PhD in New Testament Studies from the University of Auckland. He has to his credit published three book titles, multiple articles and various chapters surrounding the issues of class and social justice in scripture. He currently lectures in Religion and New Testament at Murdoch University in Australia.

Essays in this work approach topics with an eye on class struggle rather than class identity. The subjects include questions of political agency, the station of the Roman military and the applicability or redefinition of the classification, "peasant". Further topics include an exploration of the Gospels as conventional literary artifacts yielding cues as to the social practices of the elite; an exploration of the epistemological influence of the capitalistic interpretations of a non-capitalist, society; and, the recognition of hypocritical duplicity in biblical perspectives on slavery, admonishing its practice in abstraction while benefiting materially. Finally, the essays investigate the presence of populist features in scripture, viewing Jesus and his followers as a political movement; the validity of the concept of a "retainer" class; the role of Pauline gifting in class struggle; and the inherent perpetuation of classism that may have resulted through the elevation of nobility in status to the point of recognition as archangels.

Once these conversations of class in the New Testament conclude, one finds that indeed there is a relevance to class consideration in scriptural analysis. Class struggles, be they political or practical, have influenced the shape of scripture and the perception of biblical authority. The strength of this book is the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding a single theme that serve to educate the reader while underscoring the overarching argument of the collection, that class consideration has not received the attention it deserves. While this book does not address dissenting views, as a cohesive volume, it has achieved its intended goal – to invoke conversation. Thus, it has no need to entertain dissenting opinions surrounding its textual interpretations or political perspective.

This book has the opportunity to inspire the expansion of the exegetical eye of biblical study. If readers are willing to explore the

Book Reviews

political, historical and social implications of class struggles in the first century and now, they will be more attuned to the truth because of the influence of this book.

Review by Thomas Cupka
Christian Theological Seminary