
Richard Horsley has become well-known for his pioneering socio-political analysis of early Christian texts, as in his landmark volume The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context (New York 1989; reprint, Eugene, Oregon, 2006). Continuing this approach, the present work aims to understand Sirach, 1 Enoch, and Daniel "in the context of Second Temple Judea under Hellenistic imperial rule" in light of "the interrelationship of the political-economic structure, the historical background and crisis, and the cultural resources and circumstances" (9). In many ways, this important volume has been influenced by discussions held in the Wisdom and Apocalypticism Group and the Sociology of the Second Temple Group at meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in America.

After an introduction, the work consists of nine chapters and a conclusion. The first two chapters trace the political history of the Judean temple-state from Cyrus' decree till the Maccabean Revolt. While Horsley notes multiple conflicts within the Judean community under Persian rule, he identifies three successive crises involving aristocratic factions in Judea during the time of Hellenistic control, first under the Ptolemaic empire, next during the transition to Seleucid rule, and then under the Seleucid regime before the Maccabean Revolt. In the third chapter, a valuable sociological analysis of Judean society as represented in Sirach, the author sees Ben Sira as a "retainer" subject to the imperial authorities. Chapter 4 analyzes the role of scribes in ancient society (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Judea) as officials serving the ruling powers while also transmitting the national cultural repertoire. The fifth chapter argues that the main activity of scribes was oral teaching and recitation rather than writing, so that memorization would have played a stronger role than mere reading of texts.

With Chapter 6 we reach perhaps the heart of the book, since it considers the cultural repertoire of the Judean scribes in the era of the Second Temple. Using evidence from Qumran writings, Horsley suggests that the text-forms of books later considered "biblical" were not yet standardized, and that works such as Jubilees or 1 Enoch were probably as popular as the traditions found in the Torah of Moses. Sacred texts would likely have been recited from memory rather than studied academically, and what modern scholars have considered "biblical quotations" would probably have been oral allusions to traditions current in the cultural repertoire. Then Chapters 7-9 apply these perspectives in turn to the Books of Sirach, 1 Enoch, and Daniel. The conclusion makes a final appeal for these texts to be understood in the broader contexts of social structure, Judean culture, and the historical crisis within Judea in the third and second centuries B.C.E. The volume finishes with endnotes and an index of subjects, though regrettably
there is no collected bibliography or index of references to ancient texts. Still, the overall writing style is clear, and the chapters are usefully supplied with abundant subheadings.

There is much to applaud in Horsley's socio-political approach to these important Second Temple Jewish books. The general emphasis on the widespread oral use of authoritative texts is a helpful corrective to modern assumptions, as is the insistence that the term "biblical" is (strictly speaking) anachronistic for the second century B.C.E. (112). In addition, the analysis of Sirach, 1 Enoch, and Daniel profitably starts from the assumption that these works are "political-economic as well as cultural-religious" (2). On Sirach, accordingly, he insightfully notes the political as well as theological implications contained in the claim of Sir 24:8-12 that divine wisdom made her home in the Jerusalem temple (146-47). He plausibly identifies Ben Sira as one of the temple scribes, and also regards the praise of the ancestors as finding its climax in the celebration of the high priest Simeon, so that high-priestly authority is seen to exceed earlier royal power (147-48).

However, while the book's many achievements are evident, it is not quite the definitive work on its subject. For instance, while laudably wishing to escape from some unhelpful overworked dualities such as wisdom versus apocalyptic (2-4), political versus religious (2, 48), and Judaism versus Hellenism (8, 47), the author still applies rather dualistic models in other areas such as orality versus literacy (89-108) and elites versus peasantry (50-51). In my view, however, it is not a case of either orality or literacy but both (as Horsley seems to acknowledge in his qualified statements on 107), so this dichotomy cannot be pressed too far.

My remaining comments will concern Sirach, discussed principally in chapters 3-7 of the volume. Here there is relatively little interaction with a range of recent relevant scholarship in languages other than English. On the sociology of Ben Sira, for instance, the book ignores pertinent material in Oda Wischmeyer's monograph, Die Kultur des Buches Jesus Sirach (BZNW 77; Berlin 1995) esp. 49-82, as well as in Renate Egger-Wenzel and Ingrid Krammer's essay collection, Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira (BZAW 270; Berlin 1998) esp. 87-115. Moreover, there is hardly any awareness of the application of rhetorical criticism in the poetic analysis of Sirach, since Horsley claims that interpreters of Sirach "do not look for and analyze the 'blocks' [of teaching material] for rhetorical patterns" (237 n. 4). In fact, such investigation has been carried out by several scholars, and a section on "The Poetry of Ben Sira" appears in the introduction to the commentary by Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander Di Lella, The Wisdom of Ben Sira (AB 39; New York 1987) 63-74.

Perhaps most questionable is Horsley's general refusal to accept that Ben Sira would quote or interpret an authoritative literary text (119). He does admit (120) that honor of parents echoes a covenantal command (Sir 3:1-16; Exod 20:12) and that charity for the poor echoes a Deuteronomic law (Sir 4:1-6; Deut 15:7-11).