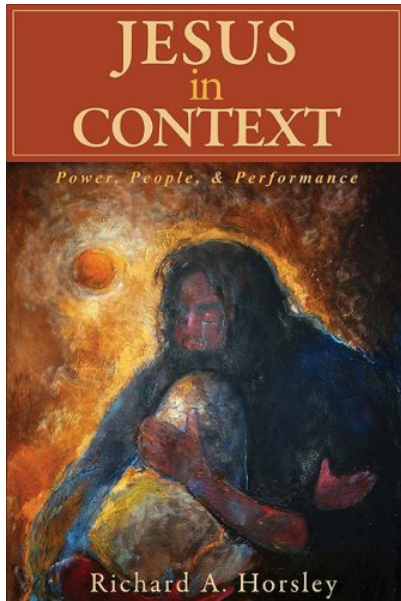


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**Horsley, Richard A.**

*Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance*

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The work of Richard Horsley has become known in the last few decades as an instance of close interaction between New Testament studies, history, and social sciences—and especially for participating in the more recent tendency in biblical scholarship to take the oral dimension of “our” ancient texts more seriously. The volume under review contains a number of essays on these subjects, most of them were published previously in books edited by Horsley.

In the introduction (1–19), Horsley briefly sketches the common rationale of the contributions gathered in this volume: to understand the earliest Jesus movement and the development of its traditions in a realistic way—beyond the modern separation of politics and religion, and with regard to the oral dimension of the texts we have as sources. This introduction closes with some remarks on “Using this Book in the Classroom” (19).

Part 1, “People’s History” (20–55), largely reproduces Horsley’s contributions to volume 1 of *Christian Origins: A People’s History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005): the introduction (20–34) and a chapter on “Jesus Movements and the Renewal of Israel” (35–55). Horsley introduces the project of a “People’s History” of Christianity as something entirely new and different from the traditional focus on “kings and wars” and separation

between political and religious history. However, he thus paints a picture of “conventional” history (as an academic discipline) that hardly does justice to the modern, academic study of (ancient) history. Moreover, while historians are usually reluctant to say very much about “ordinary” people in antiquity because the sources are not as plentiful as one might wish, Horsley counters this problem with a rather deductive recourse to cross-cultural studies and general theories. The picture of Judean and Galilean society, then, is a rather wood-cut one: the well-known standard social pyramid with a tiny elite and the great bulk of the population simply subsumed as “nonelite” or “peasants.” In this framework, Horsley understands the Jesus movement(s) of Galilee as a renewal of the covenant in the village communities—yet mostly in political and economic categories.

Part 2 leads us into another field of Horsley’s research interests: “Oral Performance” (56–108) in Q and Mark. The chapter on Q (56–88) points out the cultural difference between the producers/performers of ancient texts and their modern academic interpreters: ancient texts (such as Q, but also the other Gospels, as well as, e.g., the *Iliad*) need to be understood as orally performed texts. Moreover, if a text such as Q was meant to be *performed*, it must be understood in terms of larger compositions (e.g., speeches such as Q 6:20–49 or 7:18–35), by no means as a collection of “sayings.” Thus, Horsley gives a detailed outline of Q 6:20–49 in a poetic structure (74–81). There are just a few technical details. The text reproduced largely follows *The Critical Edition of Q*, only at some points Horsley has “been led to an alternative by poetic considerations of oral performance” (72). However, he does not indicate what these points are.

In fact, Horsley includes the Woes from Luke 6:24–26; different from the *Critical Edition*, his Q 6:27–28 closely follows Luke 6:27–28; Q 6:35 remains in its Lukan position; the second half of Q 6:29 rather corresponds to Luke 6:29, just as the preliminary text published in *JBL* 113 (1994): 495–99; Luke 6:33 has been retained; Q 6:34 is followed by Luke 6:35a and Q 6:35ab; Q 6:38 is closer to Luke, as is Q 6:41b; in Q 6:42a the preliminary reconstruction published in *JBL* 110 (1991): 494–98 is adopted; the second half of the verse is reordered in a strict parallelism, mixing the arrangements of Matthew and Luke; the ordering of Q 6:44 is closer to that of Matt 7:16; at the end of Q 6:45 the pronoun *αὐτοῦ* is absent, as in Matt 12:35 and in the preliminary reconstruction published in *JBL* 111 (1992): 500–508; Q 6:47, 49 (*τοὺς λόγους*) is partly closer to Matt 7:24, 26; however, the reconstruction of Q 6:48–49 is more cautious than the *Critical Edition* and shares the gaps in the preliminary reconstruction published in *JBL* 110 (1991): 494–98; in Q 6:49, the Lukan *εὐθύς* is left out.

It would be highly interesting to discuss the reasons for these particular reconstructions of Q, especially whether the rhythm of oral performance is so characteristic of Q

(different from Matthew and Luke) that it can serve as a criterion for reconstructing this hypothetical text. The latter endeavor, however, is strongly informed by a literary and textual paradigm. In any event, Horsley has given a very valuable impulse that deserves to be considered in Q research.

The following chapter, on “Understanding Mark as Oral Performance” (89–108), has not been previously published, only given orally in lectures and workshops. Again, Horsley hammers into readers the immense cultural difference between modern North American and European (“Western”) cultures and first-century Judea and Galilee, particularly in terms of literacy and the lack thereof. As he demonstrates, its literary character identifies the Gospel of Mark as a “text” designed for and coming from oral performance. Here, however, a remark about the question of Mark’s localization (Rome? Egypt? Syria?) would have been enormously helpful (but see 138, 145)—unless “Mark” is just a *chiffre* for narrative Jesus traditions that eventually happened to be codified in the text we know today as the Gospel according to Mark.

Part 3, “Social Memory” (109–68), begins with another original contribution on “Social Memory and Gospel Tradition” (109–25), which builds on the ideas developed in part 2 but with a slightly different twist. Now Horsley concentrates on memory as something that is embedded in social communication. Thus he basically resumes the rationale of form criticism, but with closer attention to the oral and communicative dimension of Jesus tradition: these traditions were not preserved in and of themselves but in and in relation to communities—again the motif of covenant renewal is highly prominent. The next chapter, “Patterns in the Social Memory of Jesus and Friends” (126–45), applies this stress on social memory to historical Jesus research. This leads to fundamental, and well-founded, criticism of the methodology employed by the Jesus Seminar in general and J. D. Crossan in particular: one cannot reasonably imagine Jesus as an entirely dissimilar sage, completely detached from the culture and memories of his society and uttering only brief aphorisms. Horsley, on the contrary, suggests a Jesus profoundly embedded in the Israelite “little tradition.” Most of this chapter is quite in line with the present mainstream of contemporary New Testament scholarship. Mainly building on the work done by G. Theißen in the 1990s, the criteriological paradigm has indeed shifted from dissimilarity to contextual plausibility.

The following chapter, “Popular Memory and Cultural Patterns in Mark” (146–68), is only loosely about the Gospel of Mark but rather about the Israelite “little tradition,” as opposed to the “great tradition,” the official version of history, as it were, propagated by the elite. In this chapter Horsley is very strongly influenced by the work of James C. Scott on popular resistance practiced by Southeast Asian peasants—hence the application to first-century Palestine is rather deductive. In particular, it remains inconclusive how, in

this case, the “little tradition” is to be clearly identified and distinguished from the “great tradition” as documented in the Hebrew Bible.

Part 4, “Moral Economy and the Arts of Resistance [*sic*]” (169–223), is mostly about the application of James C. Scott’s work in Jesus research. Most important is Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript”: the peasants’ alternative, subversive view of reality that usually remains underneath the apparent compliance with and deference to the ruling elite. In these three essays Horsley suggests that one should understand particularly the discourse of the early Jesus movements, documented in Mark and Q, as a “hidden transcript.” To demonstrate this, he quotes some passages from Scott’s most generalizing work (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance*) and states: “These generalizations apply to both the Herodian and high priestly rulers who controlled Palestine for the Romans and the magnates who dominated the Greek cities in the East where Paul worked” (172). This leads Horsley to a functionalistic interpretation of the Jerusalem temple and its rituals as well as a peculiar overview of Jesus and his movement in, as it were, Scottian terms (172–85). The chapter on “Jesus and the Arts of Resistance” (186–204) is a variation of the same theme, as is the chapter on “Moral Economy and Renewal Movement in Q” (205–23), albeit with a more detailed outline of Scott’s theory.

Finally, the conclusion (224–28) draws the consequences of these studies for future research: the Gospels are to be studied as entire (orally-derived, performed, and therefore somewhat fluid) texts, and Jesus is to be seen as embedded in social relations and the “little tradition” of Israel—thus politically dangerous and executed as a rebel, even if he did not lead an armed revolt.

This is followed by an appendix (229–45) that contains the larger speeches of Q (6:20–49; 7:18–35; 9:57–10:16; 11:2–4, 9–11; 11:14–20(–26); 11:39–52; 12:2–12; 22–32; also 13:29–28, 34–35) in a layout that conveys a sense of how these texts reflect the dynamics of oral performance.

The volume as a whole is clearly structured and delineates four fields of interest, but, more than other collections of essays, it tends to be repetitive. Even a reader unfamiliar with Horsley’s work will soon begin to encounter “old acquaintances”: due homage paid to W. Kelber and J. C. Scott; the Pharisees as “retainers” in the service of the temple aristocracy; the idea of covenant renewal; a clear conception of the Israelite “little” tradition. The reader gets a sense of a thinking that is very consistent in itself, albeit somewhat axiomatic and at times assertive; one might call it a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (for want of a better term).

Picking up the final page of the introduction (see above): Would I recommend this book to my students? Well, hardly as *the* reference for the historical Jesus or for the early Jesus movements. But it is certainly a handy compendium about one fairly influential thinker on these subject matters. Especially parts 2 and 3 contain a number of quite interesting, indeed important, ideas that will contribute to further research.