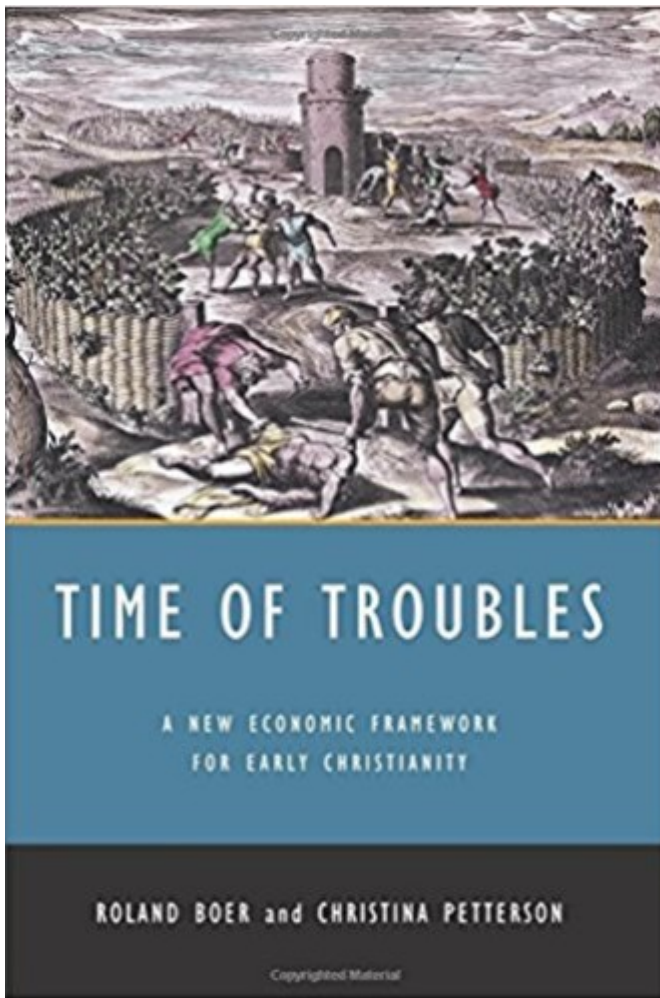


Marxism and the New Testament

As Roland Boer and Christina Pettersen see it, the Gospels contradict the witness of Jesus about slavery and property.

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Time of Troubles

A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity

By Roland Boer and Christina Petterson

Fortres

The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel (2015) established Roland Boer as a foremost interpreter of the economic realities of ancient Israel. Now Boer, who teaches at the University of Newcastle in Australia, along with Christina Petterson, another Australian scholar, turns to the New Testament to offer “a new economic framework for early Christianity.” Their realism about biblical economics overturns any tendency toward a romantic reading of the Bible.

The book’s use of Marxian analysis will be unfamiliar to many readers, and its economic jargon demands attentiveness. Grounded in Karl Marx’s class analysis and mediated by G. E. M. de Ste. Croix’s insistence that class is the defining factor in economics, Boer and Petterson challenge the “economic imperialism” of Adam Smith’s market ideology. Classical market theory insists that a growth economy is a tide that will raise all boats. Boer and Petterson believe that claim to be wholly and manifestly false.

Ste. Croix identifies four economic “regimes,” patterns that reflect the realities of social class. The *slave regime* assures the legitimacy and normalcy of slave production through which the ownership class can live well. In the *colonial regime*, the ownership class siphons off the produce and wealth of socially powerless workers. The *land regime* allows the powerful to own the land and practice patronage toward those who work the land—with the workers’ economic helplessness used by owners to legitimize the workers’ dependency.

All three of these regimes are characterized by a tense interaction between the city (*polis*) and the rural hinterland (*chora*). And all three of them involve extracting produce from the subsistence class so that the ownership class can enjoy an economic surplus.

The fourth regime consists of *subsistence agriculture*, produced by peasants who live and work on land that they do not own. In contrast to the other regimes, this economics distributes resources to members of the community and assumes the validity and viability of all members of the community. The extractive regimes, in contrast, rely on slavery maintained through the manipulation of debt, assuring that

dependent peasants can never escape the burden of debt and therefore have an open-ended obligation to the extracting class.

Boer and Petterson offer equally dense discussions of specific economic realities in the New Testament world, which the authors characterize as reflecting a slave regime. For example, they say that barley was taken to be adequate food for “slaves, peasants, the poor, and animals,” while economically advantaged people preferred the more labor-intensive wheat. City-dwellers had a “deeply unequal relationship” with those who lived in the hinterland, whose primary purpose “was to supply those who did not labor with what they regarded as the necessities of life.”

In their analysis, the “unproductive” are those who live on the surplus produced by the peasants, whereas in conventional imperial economics the unproductive are the poor people who live off the resources of the wealthy. By switching the identity of the productive and the unproductive, Boer and Petterson reverse the familiar political narrative. From their perspective, anything that results from the labor of peasants and is enjoyed by wealthy nonlaborers—including private property, coins, and the market—is a product of slavery. So too are

the valorization of truth and beauty, the fundamental place of precarious freedom, the nature of democracy, the first elaboration of a system of ethics—in short, the development of full systems of what we now call philosophy—which now . . . forms the basis of “Western” thought. None of this would have been possible without slavery.

After establishing this frame of reference, the authors turn to the economic reality reflected in early Christianity.

For Jesus property was an evil and a huge hurdle to entering the Kingdom of God. . . . Jesus values simplicity (or, in our terms subsistence survival) over luxury and rejects the power that comes with wealth. Everything about Jesus stands against the deeply-held values of the Greco-Roman ruling class, almost uniquely in the literature of the ancient world.

The book does not linger over that claim. It turns, rather, to a judgment (on the very next page!) that “within a generation the transfer of Christian ideas from the *chora* to the *polis* had taken place. This thorough shift pertains not merely to issues of

private property, but also to slaves and women.”

The remainder of the book, offering a close reading of New Testament texts, argues that the Gospel narratives of second-generation Christians were “constructed on the presupposition that the spiritual has full precedence over the material.”

As Boer and Patterson see it, the Gospels contradict the witness of Jesus himself, a man born among Galilean peasants who embraced the antislavery stance of the chora perspective. By mistakenly presenting Jesus from a polis perspective,

the Gospels propagate the slave-ethos or in our terminology the slave-relation. . . . In doing so the Gospels are not really advocating an alternative society, but remain within the parameters of the status quo. The odd rich person—who sells off property, gives it to the poor, and joins Jesus—does not change the dynamic of slaves and slave-owners. Instead he contributes to the endurance of the slave-relation.

This analysis declares that the early church promptly accommodated conventional imperial economics. As Boer and Petterson are aware, this reading presents a wholesale challenge to the typical progressive interpretation that sees the Gospels advocating an alternative economy.

The authors have no interest in pushing their analysis of the New Testament world toward contemporary consideration. However, in a passing comment, they declare that in the Gospels “the groundwork was laid for the economic imperialism that came into its own at the end of the decade of the 1980s,” an allusion to figures like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Boer and Petterson pose an immense challenge for faithful readers. If we take them seriously, we may speak more honestly about our own extractive economy and the ways we profit from it.