

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

*The Impact of Jesus in First-Century Palestine: Textual and Archaeological Evidence for Long-standing Discontent.* By Rosemary Margaret Luff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 247 pp. \$99.99 hardcover.

Rosemary Margaret Luff's *The Impact of Jesus in First-Century Palestine* sets out to understand the paradox that archaeological evidence from first-century Galilee indicates a thriving society whereas the Gospels portray a society characterized by exploitation and discontent. The author explains in her bio in the front matter that she is an archaeologist who specializes in animal and human remains from the prehistoric through medieval periods and who came to this project circuitously. This background is clear in the book: its most important contribution is its discussion of bioarchaeological evidence for dietary and health standards in first-century Palestine.

The introduction states the book's aims and lays out some methodological assumptions for examining the Gospels—namely, that the author thinks it is possible to retrieve material pertaining to the “pre-Easter” Jesus, agrees with apologists that similarity between Jesus and the early church is a better guide to historicity than dissimilarity, affirms shared themes in the Gospels as historically reliable memories, considers John to be based in part on eyewitness accounts, and prioritizes Mark and John as independent sources whose shared traditions “provide sound evidence of authenticity” (4).

Chapters 1–3 probe the Gospels for “textual evidence” of discontent in Palestine and for Jesus's personality and mission as remedies to that discontent. These chapters emphasize Jesus's messianic consciousness, imminent eschatology, thoroughgoing concern for the poor, authentic healings, dispute with the wealthy Temple establishment, and “close spiritual relationship with God” as Father (74).

The second part of the book deals with the archaeological sources and is, in general, much more nuanced than the earlier chapters. Chapter 4 follows recent scholarship by considering stepped plastered pools, stone vessels, and ossuaries as expressions of so-called common Judaism. Especially in her discussion of pig bones (and hyrax and catfish bones) at Jewish sites, Luff emphasizes the diversity of common Judaism. Because there is more evidence of differentiation between rich and poor in Judea than the Galilee, she concludes that this is why Jesus's anti-wealth ministry culminated in Judea.

Chapter 5 provides helpful syntheses and original analyses of the bioarchaeological evidence for health hazards in first-century Palestine. Luff produces some tentative statistics that demonstrate the widespread evidence of leprosy, tuberculosis, malaria, anemia, and “dog tapeworms” in human remains, often observing proof of the synergistic interaction of these hazards. Luff also investigates high infant mortality rates and proof of interpersonal and state violence (e.g., decapitation and crucifixion). Luff makes the important point that these health hazards affected the entire population (e.g., a man in a high-status burial had leprosy and tuberculosis), even though the poor faced certain exacerbating conditions. Jesus was sought after as a healer, Luff determines, because of these perilous health conditions. She believes Jesus's healings were real though caused

by a combination of the “placebo effect” and success with natural healing remedies (e.g., Dead Sea mud).

The final chapter explores status, power, and wealth. Luff illuminates evidence of stratification in the Galilee, focusing especially on the type and decoration of houses. She also notes industrial diversification. Nevertheless, Luff depicts the Galilee as a prosperous self-sufficient economy with less inequality than the southern region of Judea. She appeals to mansions and bioarchaeological evidence of meat consumption and Jerusalem’s sacrificial economy to show that Jerusalem was characterized by “*the centralization of wealth and power* that Jesus opposed in first-century Palestine” (180).

Readers will find many of Luff’s assumptions and conclusions at the intersection of texts and archaeology debatable. Luff’s discussion of Jesus is heavily dependent on the (now somewhat dated) scholarship of James Dunn and rarely provides original analyses of texts (Greek is scarce, and translations appear in the NIV and AKJV). The four Gospels are often harmonized, and their themes are treated as historically authentic, despite a “memory studies” framework. Luff does not engage with scholarship on John’s dependence (or secondary dependence) on Mark and is too quick to merge John with the other Gospels (e.g., John’s realized eschatology is folded into the imminent eschatology of the Synoptics).

Certain archaeological discussions are not as thorough and up-to-date as the sections on bones. For instance, Miller’s arguments about the utilitarian functions of stoneware and stepped pools merit further attention (88–91); Weiss’s points about the often overlooked significance of urban development in Tiberias during Jesus’s time are not broached (154–55); the ongoing debate over the location of Bethsaida is not acknowledged; Orit Peleg-Barkat and Yotam Tepper’s argument that Horvat ‘Eleq (Ramat Hanadiv) is not a lavish first-century villa is overlooked (“Between Phoenicia and Judaea: Preliminary Results of the 2007–2010 Excavation Seasons at Horvat ‘Eleq, Ramat HaNadiv, Israel,” *Strata* 32 [2014]: 49–80); and suppositions about cultural adoption and trickle-down culture, vestiges of discredited models of Hellenization/Romanization, sometimes result in the positing of static cultures and privileging of the agency of elites (100, 103).

While the archaeological sections of this book are often nuanced and thought-provoking, this reviewer is not convinced by Luff’s overall resolution to the paradox of archaeological prosperity and literary discontent—that is, her argument that Jesus targeted exploitation in the southern region of Judea because his own Galilean society was considerably less unequal. This thesis risks reviving problematic older theories that romanticized the egalitarian piety of Jesus’s Galilee while demeaning the avaricious Judaism of Judea. It also ignores Jesus’s indictment of Galilean towns and his conflicts with elite (or “sub-elite”) scribes and Pharisees in the Galilee.

These caveats aside, this book offers the most accessible English discussions of bioarchaeological data from Palestine that I have encountered. These discussions will, I hope, attract greater attention to this important material and stimulate new insights into the lives of Jesus and his earliest followers.

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