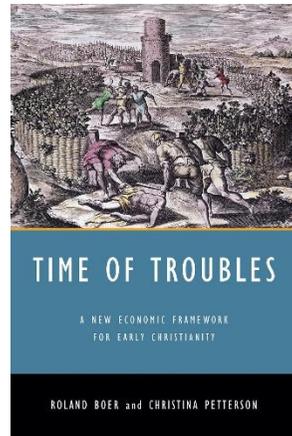


Roland Boer and Christina Petterson. *Time of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. Pp. xxi + 229. ISBN 978-1506406312. Paperback. \$39.00.

Interest in the ancient Roman economy has recently surged amongst New Testament scholars, especially as the topic relates to the Pauline collection for the gentiles (per Rom 15:22-33; 1 Cor 16:1-4). However, what is often not explored in this debate is one's methodological understanding of the ancient Roman economy, and *Time of Troubles* by Boer and Petterson "proposes nothing less than a new model for understanding the economy of the Greco-Roman era, in which Christianity arose" (p. xi). Fundamentally, this book is an attempt to promote a Marxist reading of the ancient economy; it is this methodology to which the authors are "deeply" indebted (p. xv). They not only have mainstream capitalistic readings of the ancient Greco-Roman economy in their sights, but the broader interpretative sphere, which they call "economics imperialism" (p. xvi). To this end, their arguments and methods are set forth with clarity and argued with zeal.



While the majority of the book is largely accessible for seminary students and graduates, it must be said that the most dense and difficult section of the book can be found in the first chapter on economic theory (pp. 1-48). The authors' primary target, as already noted, is neoclassical economic theory and specifically the argumentation of the philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790; pp. 3-9). The representative statement by Smith that Boer and Petterson find most troubling states, "[there] is...a certain propensity in human nature...the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (p. 3 n. 3). Boer and Petterson note,

"economics imperialism is premised on the three reductions of individualizing, desocializing, and dehistoricizing" (p. 3). That is, the universal human nature is bound up in economic "self-interest" (p. 3). The authors unambiguously contend against such an assumption by saying proponents of "neoclassical economics" "assume that what counts as 'the economy' is autonomous and self-regulating, where individual 'entrepreneurs' engage in trade and commerce, following their natural inclinations in terms of rational self-interest and comparative advantage without any consideration for social determining forces" (p. 6). Hence, Boer and Petterson argue that said proponents often anachronistically import modern assumptions of human nature back into the texts of the ancient world. Thus they conclude

The reasons for [neoclassical economic theory] inadequacy are many but we emphasize its claims to a form of disciplinary and ideological imperialism, which has become known as economic imperialism. A dual process is involved in such imperialism in which radical reductionism produces a set of basic premises which are then applied to all human activity at all times. In other words, economic imperialism involves a false universal, which simultaneously draws upon the specific, limited conditions of a particular approach and negates those specifics to claim universality. (p. 3)

Instead of economic theory being located with "moral philosophers," the issue has become centered on "applied sciences" (p. 7). Boer and Petterson are keen to avoid any form of imperialism, but one is left wondering if there is anything such as a concept of a 'universal' human experience, and if there is not, then what becomes of history itself? The methodology, laid out in great detail in the opening chapter, ultimately concludes that *Régulation* theory (defined as "the social, institutional, and ideological factors that determine the stabilities and transformations of a system," p. 40, pp. 40-46) is their most preferred lens by which they view the ancient evidence. "Flexibility" within this construct is concerned with ensuring

that such categories remain supple" (p. 45). "Crisis," that is, disruptive patterns to the establishment, is supplied as a "universal." Thus, the "flexibility" (p. 45) offered by Marxism and *Régulation* theory is the most important heuristic device for Boer and Petterson's reconstruction of the ancient economy. For Boer and Petterson, the complexities, crises, and dynamic power shifts of the ancient world demand a sort of elasticity in order to account for the various conceptual agents of the Greco-Roman world. In viewing the ancient evidence in this manner, Boer and Petterson see the clear exploitation of land and bodies (more precisely, slaves) by the ruling class as the principal baseline of the ancient world economy.

Chapters 2 (pp. 49-74) and 3 (pp. 75-101) survey various agricultural issues in the ancient world including the notion of subsistence survival and the use of "space." In this assessment Boer and Petterson pull in vast resources concerning crop production, the use of animals and the issue of "prosperity." They rightly question the economic hegemony of the ancient world, precisely in relation to the flexibility needed for the ancients to survive. For instance, Boer and Petterson note the treatment of animals in terms of necessity where "the techniques of production became more intensive, and human beings and animals began to live collectively in villages" (p. 52). In order to survive, people had to be creative in how they tilled the ground and treated their livestock, illustrating the authors' point about flexibility and the lack of personal resources for the 'peasants' (p. 59).

Finally, they bring up the notion of exploitation and the issue of "constructed space" (p. 75). The debate concerning "city" (*polis*) and "village" (*chōra*) is given specific primacy in Boer and Petterson's arguments. Rome is the principle "parasitic city" (*polis*; p. 81) whereas the remainder of the Roman Empire can be categorized as Rome's "colonized *chōra*" (p. 81). The use of the land in terms of optimal output (specifically grain and goods) by *chōra* for the *polis* reveals the exploitative nature of Rome and the use of the land: whoever controls the soil controls the bodies of slaves and controls the *polis*. Thus, Boer and Petterson note the

integrative nature of exploitation and reliance, where flexibility is necessary due to the crises involved in the empire and amongst the populace. While Marxist language is used throughout, it is still not entirely clear that flexibility is specifically excluded by capitalist or neoclassical theory. However, Boer and Petterson have rightly stressed the exploitative nature of the ancient world with clarity.

Perhaps the most rewarding and disturbing chapter of *Time of Troubles* is chapter 4 (pp. 103-127), which centers on Boer and Petterson's exploration of the ancient "slave-relationship." As they rightly note, "Slavery in the course of the Greco-Roman era became the prime mode of extracting surplus, to the extent that one may speak of a slave economy" (p. 103). In their argumentation, Boer and Petterson seek to undermine any notion of "free labor" (pp. 104-109) in the slave economy, although most advocates of neoclassical economic theory would surely concur with their conclusions, specifically in the sense that slavery was a cornerstone of the ancient economy, but this does not seem to exclude patronage or labor done amongst the community. Given the nature of ancient "gift" giving,¹ one wonders if Boer and Petterson have offered readers the most probable interpretation of the ancient evidence. Additionally, Boer and Petterson conclude that the notion of "private property" is predicated upon the notion of a slave being a "thing" (pp. 114-118), and any such idea is fundamentally "created by the economic reality of slavery" (p. 118). This argument has significant force and deserves more engagement than one can offer in a review, but their argument does reveal the extent authoritarians will go to ensure their own survival at the expense of others: this seems to confirm an additional universal axiom—that powerful people often have their own self-interests in mind. Boer and Petterson's line of argumentation is clarified and expanded in chapter five (pp. 129-151), where the chronology of ancient "regimes," "a constellation of institutional forms in which one form becomes dominant over the

¹ See John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

others" (p. 129) illustrates the dynamics of political and social power, and how empires and emperors controlled the masses through violence and land, and how they viewed the land and the workers of the land.

The final chapter (pp. 153-184) is the incorporated summation of the various economic and theoretical threads, culminating in the exploratory outworking of these various principles in the New Testament. While chapter 4 was the most disturbing in how it laid out the various treatments of slaves, this chapter challenges multiple aspects of various texts of the New Testament. "Everything about Jesus stands against the deeply-held values of the Greco-Roman ruling class, almost uniquely in the literature of the ancient world" (p. 156). However, Boer and Petterson believe the Gospels are "second generation texts" (p. 157), and it is their belief that these texts illustrate a *polis* point of view: that is, the author of the Gospel of John has a "ruling class ideology" in mind when depicting Jesus and his surroundings (p. 159). Even in the Gospel of Mark, "often assumed to be the text closest to the "rural" roots of Jesus and early Christianity" (p. 160) contains a *polis*-based perspective, viewing various laborers from the perspective of the rich, rather than among said exploited class.

How the interpretation of Boer and Petterson works with various liberation or marginal readings of Jesus remains to be seen, especially because of their belief that both John and Mark (and presumably Luke and Matthew as well) held *polis*-level beliefs of the various infirm and diseased people in the Gospels (pp. 160-161). For instance, they note that Mark's depiction of the recipients of healing in the miracle stories "function not so much as echoes of the tough realities of life where disease and hard, repetitive labor reshaped bodies, but as *polis*-based perceptions of the working rural population" (p. 160). In support of this contention, Boer and Petterson assert that popular perception of the *polis* emphasized the "misshapen, ugly, and unlucky" nature of the poor (pp. 160-161), although they are quick to note that Mark does not "offer a ruling class perspective per se" (p. 161).

Additionally, Boer and Petterson's application of the "slave-relation" to the various texts in the New Testament concerning slavery is both interesting and disconcerting, especially since they affirm with others that Paul was himself a slave-owner and a believer that slaves (e.g. Onesimus in Philemon) were "things" (pp. 169-170), perhaps even sexual "things" (p. 171). Fundamentally, the Apostle Paul was inconsistent with regards to slavery, equality and subordination, and he made no attempt at resolving this conundrum (p. 174). Thus, the harsh realities of the ancient world and all of its exploitative mechanics offer us a grim and necessary corrective to overly idealistic methods of interpreting the New Testament, and Boer and Petterson conclude with this lingering and powerful question: "what do we make of these realities?" (p. 188).

First, the strengths of this work are several. The most significant area lies within the uniformity of the writing itself: in a work written by two people (specifically academics), the writing remains streamlined throughout with no shifts in personal style or unusual colloquialisms. The challenge of two people writing a singular work on such a dense and difficult topic is shown to be easily attainable by the well-defined incorporative writing style of Boer and Petterson, even when they note their own disagreements (pp. xxi, 190).

A second major accomplishment of this work is their emphasis on the nature of the ancient world, specifically through their engagement with ancient primary sources. Their surveys of land, agriculture and the treatment of slaves are appropriately in-depth and necessary for any student of the New Testament.

Thirdly, they rightly emphasize the nature of "power" and "exploitation" in the ancient world, and while their reading is not ultimately persuasive in this author's opinion, their emphasis on "flexibility" and "crisis" highlights a need for those of us who adopt neoclassical economic theory to be more precise and coherent in our reading of ancient literature. To this end, this work is a brilliant success.

However, there are some concerns and lingering questions concerning the conclusions and methods within the book. For instance, there is a lack of engagement with modern sources generally considered to be relevant to the ancient economy, particularly the work of Longenecker, Friesen, deSilva, and Downs.² In particular, Downs has recently shown that patronage is a large part of the Greco-Roman world.³ Boer and Petterson are largely dismissive of ancient patronage (pp. 18, 129-130) seeing it as a ruling class option. However, they do not address Paul's relationship with Phoebe in Rom 16:1-2, whom he calls a *προστάτις* ("patron").⁴ If patronage is predicated upon the free exchange of goods or services, regardless of one's social standing, then this element of the social world undermines Boer and Petterson's conceptual framework significantly. Paul's own impoverishment (cf. 2 Cor 6:10)⁵ and imprisonment (cf. Phil 1; Col 4:18 if Pauline) would seem to emphasize his own "crisis" model as well, especially with his relationship to Phoebe. Unfortunately, Boer and Petterson never explore the issue of Paul and poverty.

A final criticism stems from a lack of engagement with disjunctive elements of Paul's epistles concerning power and exploitation. To illustrate this, one might consider Paul's contested relationship with slaves and women. Paul's own rhetoric of Onesimus in the Epistle to Philemon does not appear to be consistent with Boer and Petterson's reading of the New Testament, suggesting discontinuity between some of the New

² Cf. Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000); David J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Walter Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, "The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 61-91. Scheidel is mentioned several times in *Time of Troubles*, but not Friesen.

³ Downs, *Collection*, 85-89.

⁴ Cf. Elizabeth A. McCabe "A Reexamination of Phoebe as a "Diakonos" and "Prostatis": exposing the Inaccuracies of English Translations." *SBL Forum* 7.5, 2009 (<http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=830>)

⁵ ὡς πτωχοὶ πολλοὺς δὲ πλουτίζοντες; see also 2 Cor 8:9.

Testament authors and the wider Greco-Roman world. For instance, Onesimus being called ἐμοῦ τέκνου (v.10, "my very child") and τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα (v.12, "my own affections") suggests that Onesimus has been moved from the realm of "slave" or "thing" and into the realm of family (v.17: προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ, "receive him as me"). This sort of emotional rhetoric does not seem appropriate for a slave, but it makes sense as an ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν ("beloved brother").

Additionally as regarding Paul and women, Paul himself appears to undermine any semblance of marital hierarchy in 1 Cor 7:4, where explicit language concerning sexual ἐξουσιάζει ("authority") is entirely removed from the conjugal equation, where even the husband's body is emptied of authoritarianism. Paul even believes women have sexual needs and desires, for neither party has the freedom to deny the other (v.5: μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους).⁶ When neither husband nor wife has an ontological basis for subordination, one wonders how consistent Boer and Petterson's interpretation actually is when applied to the New Testament. The lack of any specific subject or scripture indexes in the work is also a minor issue for the reader.

As regards their methodology, the questions that still linger are: is "flexibility" itself a universal reality in the ancient world and today? If so, why should "flexibility" be colonized exclusively under Marxist theory? Is flexibility excluded from capitalist or neoclassic economic theory? Have Boer and Petterson exchanged one universal axiom for another? Are slaves excluded from patronage or gift-relationships?

Despite my criticisms and lingering questions, the strength of this book lies in its survey of the raw data and in its challenge to all New Testament scholars to consider their own assumptions regarding these ancient texts. While the methodology is quite questionable in numerous places and their reading of certain texts is highly unlikely, the provocative

⁶ See Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) and Ronald Pierce, "1 Corinthians 7: Paul's Neglected Treatise on Gender," *Priscilla Papers* 23:3 (Summer 2009): 8-13.

and clear articulation of their thesis nevertheless renders this book worthy of sustained engagement with those who seek to explore the unattractive realities of the ancient world.

Nicholas Quient⁷
Pasadena, California

⁷ Nick Quient (MA New Testament Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary).