

Peter Oakes. *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. Pp. xiii + 194. ISBN: 978-0-8006-6359-9. \$39.00 cloth.

Peter Oakes, Greenwood Lecturer in New Testament (University of Manchester), builds on recent archaeological study of ancient Pompeii and seeks to make this relevant for NT study. The relevant aims are (1) to refine our understanding of the social make-up of typical house churches and (2) to explore how an NT text (Romans 12) might sound to such a typical group in Rome.

To accomplish the first aim, Oakes takes a close look at the archaeological finds in one section of Pompeii, a block known as the Insula of the Menander (chap. 1). This insula consists of a large number of dwellings, workshops, gardens, and so on, all of varied size, two-storied in some places, and home to people of varied wealth and social status. Maps and pictures help orient the reader. Oakes reconstructs four of the dwellings and their inhabitants, creating with considerable imagination and detail four households. The reader meets, for example, Iris the barmaid, a slave whose work also involves providing sexual

favors to bar guests, and Sabina the freedwoman and impoverished stone-worker. Oakes then asks (chap. 2) what we might learn from this insula as to the typical social make-up of early Christian communities. A common reconstruction, against which Oakes argues, envisions poor believers meeting in the home of a wealthy elite. Instead, Oakes proposes a space-distribution model which relies more on the potential size of dwelling space to reconstruct social status. At least two results will be important to NT scholars. First, it is doubtful we would find many (if any) of the truly elite of the Greco-Roman world in such groups, nor would early Christians meet in such elite homes (against Theissen, et al.). Instead, second, there was quite a diversity among the allegedly undifferentiated mass of the poor in Greco-Roman society. There were, of course, the slaves, the destitute, those who lived on the bare edge of survival. But there were also poor craftworkers, such as Holconius the cabinet maker, with some means and space enough for a meeting of 30–40 people.

Chapter three makes the leap from Pompeii to Rome. Oakes acknowledges the differences—Holconius, for example, could not afford quite as large a space in Rome—but argues convincingly that the types of poor individuals and households, and their relationships to one another, theorized in Pompeii are what we would also expect in Rome. Through the eyes of this model Roman craftworker house church, Oakes then takes us briskly through Rom 12. The craftworking family of Holconius “would appreciate the truth of the interdependence of the household members” (“just as in one body we have many parts, and not all the parts have the same function,” 12:4). However, the sort of interdependence, even between slave and master, heard in “we who are many are one body in Christ and . . . parts of each other” (12:5) “challenged the most fundamental conceptual structures of the household” (p. 103). The allocation of gifts by God (12:6), rather than by the highest-status householder, would disrupt the normal social expectations of the group. “Showing mercy” (12:8) would have strong economic meaning for this economically challenged group (cancel debts, defer repayment; p. 106). I found particularly interesting Oakes’s reflections on what all of this might mean to an outsider, some of whose slaves or household members participated in the house church of another householder (stolen allegiances?).

In chs. five and six, Oakes then explores how various members of the house church might have heard certain themes in Romans. Primus, the bath-stoking slave, would likely have heard *dikaiosyne* as “justice” (so also N. T. Wright) rather than the more theologically freighted Jewish “righteousness.” Endurance and eternal life would have carried great significance for many of the barely surviving members. Paul’s thoughts on Jews and Jewish matters would have occasioned surprise (and some consternation) to a better-off nonelite. “To a Roman such as Holconius, it would sound rather topsy-turvy for a Jew to talk of going about bringing the nations to obedience. This was more what Rome did” (p. 152).

My initial hesitation—What can Pompeian archaeological remains have to do with reading Romans?—was overcome through this delightfully well-written book. Only in parts of ch. one did I feel a bit overwhelmed by the archaeological detail. This could be a helpful ancillary text in a course on Paul’s letter to the Romans, both to introduce students to the potential value of social-

historical readings of the letter and to stimulate their thinking about what Paul's words would have meant to Roman hearers "at ground level." The text prompts a basic hermeneutical question: should an interpreter try to "get inside Paul's head," that is, try to discern the apostle's intent, or listen "at ground level" with a theorized audience? Oakes largely does the latter.

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