

One New Book for the Preacher

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Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013)

You may be wondering what a book of critical scholarship on the archaeology of ancient Pompeii has to do with our preaching ministry during the season of Pentecost. It might be exciting had remnants of some early Christian presence been suddenly discovered in the ruins, but this is not the case. And indeed, the first half of Peter Oakes's book is about as technical as they come, full of guild-specific vocabulary and seemingly endless lists of the precise weights and measurements of the hundreds of tools, furniture, and other household items painstakingly catalogued by the excavators of the town. There are some pictures, yes, but even these are drab. Yet for those preachers willing and able to endure the statistical analyses, Oakes has provided much low-hanging fruit for our taking. The book is, in the end, a surprise exercise in historical imagination. It strikes me that this is exactly what we preachers do each Pentecost.

There are two unexpected turns that comprise the action of this book. After a thorough survey of various houses in Pompeii, Oakes compares them with socio-economic models to correlate the square footage of a family's living space with their social status in the city. In this first turn, Oakes estimates for example, that the 78% of the city's population who lived near and below the subsistence level resided in rooms sized less than 199 square feet. In contrast, the 2.5% that comprised the regional and municipal elites are naturally paired with the larger homes of Pompeii typically totaling above 1,000 square feet. The result is a vivid picture of the ancient family, business, and city. However, it is the second turn of the book that bears the payoff for the preacher. Based on data from New Testament scholarship on the size and socio-economic breakdown of house churches, Oakes emerges a "model house church" from the ruins of Pompeii and then recalculates some of his formulas to extrapolate that congregation to a much larger scale, the ancient city of Rome.

My pulse quickened as I was introduced to this ancient congregation of my believing ancestors. They meet in the home/workshop of the craftworker, Holconius, who serves as the group's patron, 30 members cramming into 300 square feet. The space is "spartan; dark if the doors were closed, open to the street if they were open; in a very noisy environment; heavily encumbered with materials, tools and work in progress; lacking in cooking facilities and latrine."¹ There are a few other householders present, but the great majority of the group consists of slaves, freedmen, migrant workers, and the homeless. We meet some of these members in Oakes's vivid reconstruction. There is Primus, the gentile slave. There is Sabina, a freed slave, scrapping for survival in the wake of being released by the master who had formerly provided for at least her basic physical needs. There is Iris, the bar maid, rented out for sex. And there is Holconius, the householder, a cabinet-maker thrust into a sense of responsibility for whatever this *ekklēsia* was and whatever it was to become.

What ensues is a reading of Romans that thoroughly divests the letter's themes from the shadow of Martin Luther's individualistic interpretation, returning the letter to its home: the local house-church. We experience the great themes of Romans through the lives of its true addressees. The promise of divine justice is no longer relegated to theories of atonement, but is now cast in the light of Primus's hope that one day his oppressors will be punished. The promise of eternal life, "astonishingly underplayed by scholars," is proof for members like Sabina that "the gospel validates their suffering and encourages them in their day-by-day endurance."² Iris is promised that her abused body can be a "living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1). And Holconius grapples with the staggering reality and responsibility that all these, even these, are the "many brothers and sisters" of Jesus, the firstborn (Rom 8:29).

If someone such as Holconius had been asked to picture a group of people answering to the description that Paul gives in Romans, the picture would not look like that group in the workshop, including his own slaves and children, the pair of stoneworkers who were scrabbling for subsistence, and the rather dubious serving girl from the bar down the street. Surely the Spirit-filled children of God ought to be a carefully selected group living a contemplative life in a temple on an island somewhere? Paul said that the Christians were indeed carefully chosen— but they turned out to be this lot!³

The book leads us not just into the raw data, but into the *feeling* of shock as this ragamuffin group of the redeemed stare at one another, their mouths open, at the first hearing of Romans 8:16. In that context, "We are all God's sons and daughters" didn't sound sentimental. It sounded like a bomb exploding.

And so perhaps the gift of this book in the here and now is to offer us preachers a corrective to the high-mindedness of Pentecost. After all, it is easy to get caught up in the fireworks: the tongue-talking, the fire-splitting, the fiery sermon by one who had been friends with the resurrected Jesus that launched the (capital C) Church into existence and on toward global influence. It is easy to speak of Acts 2 as the birthday of a new religious institution that has led to the very pulpit and pews before us. The on-the-ground reality of the Day of Pentecost was all that it meant for (little c) house-churches: small groups of Christians crammed into dark rooms, discovering what it meant to un-remember everything that the wider culture said had value and to dismember every dividing wall between them. "Even on my slaves, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit."

Notes

1 Oakes, 94-95.

2 Ibid., 140-141.

3 Ibid., 165