

The Kingdom of God in Selected Christian Living Education Modules viewed through Jesus of Nazareth's Vision of the Reign of God

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Abstract: This article offers a study of Jesus' Vision of the Reign of God as a foundation for the Christian Living Education Modules. Jesus of Nazareth's ministry during the Roman Empire's rule should be part of existing modules on God's Kingdom as this would clarify the context of discipleship and ministry. Jesus, who lived and proclaimed God's ruling presence, will be better understood and also grasped as a model if he is examined through historically-grounded studies, especially those written by Richard Horsley and other authors who are identified with the 'Christology from below' approach. Horsley's scholarly studies could assist in a more historical rendering of Jesus' vision of the Good News of the Reign of God for today's learners.

Keywords: Jesus of Nazareth • Kingdom of God • Reign of God • Vision • Discipleship • Ministry • Richard A. Horsley

Introduction

Jesus of Nazareth's mission was guided by his vision of the Good News of the Reign of God: Life's transformation under God's presence and experienced through "wholesome"¹ relationships in the social,

¹ 'Wholesome' here refers to the biblical concept of *shalom*. "Jesus made people experience, through his ministry, the fulness of shalom, a Hebrew word that means peace, harmony, wholeness, fulfillment, prosperity, welfare, and serenity—signs of God's reign. He said: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (John 14:27). This 'Peace,' shalom, is not just a simple experience of tranquility but an experience of something palpable: healing, forgiving, and breaking bread as a community as felt expressions of compassion and care." Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Culture as Enabler for SDGs: Learning from Jesus

political, economic, cultural, ecological, and cosmic realms. Jesus fulfilled this vision through his ministry that is imbued with compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity with the excluded/outcasts. Through his life, the God of mercy and forgiveness is also proclaimed and revealed.

While the divine is revealed through Jesus, it is also through his proclamation that we see the character of a faithful and committed proclaimer of God—revealing through himself the qualities that his followers, by implication, could emulate and embody. In other words, proclaiming the Kingdom of God also reveals the character of the proclaimer-Jesus whose life inspires personal and communal response to his invitation to care for the poor, discriminated, and excluded.

Being a facilitator for many years, I followed the Christian Living Education (CLE) modules from Grade school, Junior, and Senior High School. I paid special attention to their presentation of the biblical vision of the Reign of God. I examined ten (10) sample CLE modules via Content Analysis² and discovered their emphasis on discipleship—one that expects adherence to the values of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, they lacked the more historically grounded and contextual approach to the study of Jesus, whose vision of the Good News of the Reign of God is concretized through his ministry of healing, table fellowship, reconciliation, teaching, and prophetic denunciation of oppressive

of Nazareth's Vision/Mission," *Journal of Dharma* 46, no. 3 (July-September 2021): 350.

² For the whole process of Content Analysis, see Romela D. Sanga, *Jesus of Nazareth's Vision of the Reign of God in the Works of Richard Horsley: An Appropriation to Revitalize Religious Education Instructions on the Reign of God* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Maryhill School of Theology, 2023), 142-248.

systems, customs, and legalities.³ Since Jesus showed himself, through his life/ministry, as an exemplar of a faithful and committed servant of God, the CLE may have to also offer him as a model, that is, by presenting him as someone who is accessible to imitation in discipleship (cf. “Come follow me.”: Mt 4:19; see also Lk 18:22; Mt 16:24; Mk 1:17; Lk 9:23).

This article will initially examine the data found in the sampled CLE modules in terms of their treatment/communication of the Kingdom of God (or Reign of God⁴) and its proclaimer, Jesus of Nazareth. This is crucial for a critical study meant to enrich the content of modules and thereby improve learning. This step will be followed by a process of scholarly inquiry into the works of Richard Horsley and other scholars who wrote about the historical Jesus and his vision of the Reign of God.⁵ The

³ See Richard A. Horsley and Tom Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 164; see also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 104; Richard A. Horsley, *Empowering the People: Jesus, Healing, and Exorcism* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), 32-34; Ernest Van Eck, “Interpreting the Parables of the Galilean Jesus: A Social-Scientific Approach,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, South Africa 65, no.1, (16 September. 2009): 310-21; Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 25th-anniversary edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 35-45.

⁴ The Reign of God is a preferred translation of βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ since the Greek word for the kingdom (*basileia*) lies in the Aramaic term *malkut*, which Jesus may have used; the emphasis is on the ruling presence of God. The choice of the phrase “Reign of God” hopes to balance the emphasis on the use of “Kingdom” which may point to a specific territory or refer to an after-life region.

⁵ See Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, chapters 6-12; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of*

goal is for the CLE instructions' improvement through a sound appropriation of the current scholarly literature which is well-grounded in the socio-historical context of Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of the Reign of God. It is hoped that this study will be able to guide CLE Instructors in faithfully following Jesus, whose vision was fulfilled through his caring ministry to the poor, the discriminated, and the excluded of society.

Data from Christian Living Education Modules

Ten modules have been sampled from the Grade school, Junior, and Senior High School Christian Living Education instructional materials from five schools in the National Capital Region, also known as Metropolitan Manila, the capital region of the Philippines. The following are the data culled from the modules' presentation of the topic of the 'Kingdom of God':

Module #1: This module emphasizes that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, spread worldwide. It was proclaimed and established by Jesus. It is the central Message of the Gospel and communicated through the parables. Its invisible power changes the lives of people. It grows like a seed through the Church as the Holy Spirit ensures its growth. It is different from the human realm as God's kingdom lasts forever.

Module #2: The Kingdom of God is in the heart and center

Jesus of Nazareth (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 93-102; Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 23-36; Nicholas Perrin and Jonathan Lunde, eds. *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 54-114; Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God": Jesus and Children," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 469-480.

of Jesus of Nazareth's mission and ministry on earth. He was called the Messiah-King, who served and freed the people from sin. He used the parables to establish the truths about the Kingdom of God which grows, bears fruits, and is the most valuable treasure one could have in life. God's Kingdom is for all of us, and we experience it here on Earth. The Church is the seed, sign, and instrument of the Kingdom of God.

Module #3: The Beatitudes taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount pointed out the true happiness and blessings that can only be found in God. They are the center of Jesus' teaching, the footpath to eternal life. They contain the values/qualities that enable one to detach oneself from worldly possessions and center on attitudes that will make one inherit the Kingdom of God. They require doing good and relating to one another as brothers and sisters. In Jesus' Beatitudes, the poor and the powerless are the main beneficiaries of his blessings.

Module #4: The Good News of the Kingdom of God is the center of Jesus' teaching and preaching. Jesus made use of parables to communicate God's presence in ordinary life. The Kingdom of God grows and bears fruits like a seed through many good acts shared with others. The Kingdom of God offers a state of love, peace, and joy. It is a gift and a powerful symbol of God's active presence among His people.

Module #5: The Beatitudes are spiritual and moral rules to be followed to attain the blessings of true happiness in God. One must work for this gift by doing something good for others, such as serving and helping the sick, poor, oppressed, and unfortunate. The Beatitudes illustrate the call to live the essential qualities, attitudes, and values, such as justice, peace, mercy, and love to be truly happy. To be truly happy, we must serve and help others, especially the vulnerable. The values upheld by the Beatitudes are the opposite of worldly standards.

Module #6: Jesus exemplified the task of a prophet by proclaiming the Word of God, performing signs and wonders, and suffering a martyr's fate. Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Repentance and conversion are needed to enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a dynamic symbol of God's active presence among His people. Becoming like little Children was stressed for inclusion in God's Kingdom.

Module #7: The content of the Good News of the Kingdom of God was presented under the Sacrament of Confirmation using parables. The Kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus, the Messiah, through his words and deeds. It is a gift of salvation to all nations. It is in the process of being "already here" with Jesus' saving presence. It will fully come when the pilgrim Church meets the demands of repentance, conversion, and response in faith, hope, and living out the values of justice, freedom, peace, forgiveness, and love. It triumphs when God reigns in people's hearts, minds, and wills. For the many who have not heard, accepted, and lived the Good News, the Kingdom of God is already here but not yet fully established. The Church, distinct from other societies, is the seed, sign, represent, and instrument of the coming of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not a political kingdom but a condition where God reigns in people's hearts, minds, and wills.

Module #8: Jesus, as the Messiah, proclaimed God's Kingdom in action through His Healing, Exorcism, Restoring life, and Nature Miracles. Through the healing ministry, Jesus addressed the needs of the people and relieved their physical suffering and illnesses, signs of God's unconditional love and forgiveness. For healing to take place, faith is necessary.

Module #9: The Beatitudes were Jesus' teachings to achieve the secret to a happy and blessed life. They contain the values and attitudes that Jesus challenged the people to adopt and live a life centered on God and one's neighbors. The Blessings of the Kingdom are promised to the poor and

powerless. The Kingdom's blessings were implied and promised to those who went beyond the external legal and customary observances.

Module #10: Jesus' earthly mission came from God the Father. God's Kingdom is not the other world or the salvation of the soul attained once we die. It is present here and now amid people. It is a Kingdom that emphasizes justice and liberation for the poor and freedom for the oppressed. It brings health, welfare, well-being, and life, to the people on earth, as a foretaste of the Second Coming that is yet to come. Jesus' passion and death resulted from his ministry that proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, which led him to conflict with the authorities. Salvation would thus refer to a quality of life, a life of total well-being. It is not only the soul's after-life salvation but also the coming of health, justice, and liberation.

Discussion

All modules affirm the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' message found in the Scriptures. It is the social vision of Jesus as the prophet, healer, miracle worker, preacher, and teacher (proclaimer), while Jesus himself is also proclaimed as the Lord, messiah-King, and Christ. The titles of prophet, healer, miracle worker, preacher, and teacher refer to a historical person engaged in ministry to communities; the titles of Lord, messiah-King, and Christ are more identified with the apostolic proclamation of the salvific Christ—a 'faith-knowledge' that suggests beyond the historic significance for the present. The modules, however, do not elaborate on the connection between the historical and the transcendental characterizations of Jesus.

Five modules (numbers 1, 3, 6, 7, and 9) affirmed the nature of the Kingdom of God as a promise—that is, the fullness of life or the 'not yet' as eternal life, being opposed to the 'already here' which faithful Christians or

the Church would be able to experience through ethical observances in line with the challenge of Jesus in the parables and the Beatitudes. Modules #3 and #7 present this double meaning of the ‘already here’ working in the ‘present age’ and the ‘not yet’ which is the ‘age to come’ that points to the Kingdom as slowly working toward ultimate fulfillment and it is not radically breaking through human history to bring perfect bliss in the world. Modules #5, #9, and #10 dispense with the tension between the ‘already here’ and the ‘not yet’ by stressing the here-and-now blessings promised to the poor, powerless, and vulnerable. Module #2 distinctly emphasizes the Church as the instrument of the Kingdom of God while Module #4 puts great emphasis on the meaning of the Kingdom of God as a ‘this-world’ divine presence. Module #2’s church as an instrument of God would thus complement #4’s understanding of the divine presence in this world. Module #7 stands out as the most apolitical by stressing the meaning of the Kingdom of God as God’s reign in the hearts, minds, and wills of people—such reign is not political; presumably, an intellectual and moral force that affects the behavior of people, opening themselves up to the promise of eternal salvation.

The Kingdom of God as the symbol of God’s presence was shown to be communicated by Jesus, mainly via his parables, teachings about the Beatitudes, and through his ministry of healing, exorcism, and miracle works. While the prophetic vision aspect of the meaning of the Kingdom of God is not absent in the modules, it is also being identified with blessings (Beatitudes) and the other-worldly gift of the fullness of life (salvation), especially for the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable. Such blessings and salvation have been fulfilled in and through the person of Jesus.

The modules all took into account the Kingdom of

God's historical (task) and ultimate (promise) dimensions which also implied some demands (internalizing values and attitudes) for it to be realized in one's life and our midst. However, some modules also emphasize detachment from this-worldly values and pursuits as well as putting trust in a merciful and forgiving God. This is further connected with the promise of the Kingdom as Eternity, a place where inclusion is assured for those who practice spiritual and moral rules. Other-worldly rewards await those who become like little children.

The "other-worldly" object of reward and promise is more pronounced in how most of the modules present the Kingdom of God. Dovetailing with this object of reward is the believer's posture of faith expressed through doing good for others as well as devotion and trust in the divine bestowal of saving grace. The challenge of following Jesus' example as a discipleship model tends to be expressed in an apolitical manner which is inconsistent with a more politically-stirring ministry of Jesus himself. Thus, the more pious stance of dependence and trust in a God tends to overlook the call to participate in the project of making present the Kingdom as a demanding form of discipleship, that is involved in the struggle against socio-historical forms of evil (oppressive marginalization, racism, bigotry, dehumanizing exploitation of workers, degradation of the environment, etc.). Moreover, a more interiorized understanding of the Kingdom (reigning in hearts and minds) also reinforces the lack of focus on the social cost of discipleship.

A discipleship that is pulled by the more apolitical gesture of devotional and pious practices wired to the promise of grace may call to mind Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words:

Cheap Grace is the deadly enemy of our church.... It is grace without price: grace without cost!... Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine ... an intellectual assent ...

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner ... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁶

A leaning toward the “transcendent” identity of Jesus, affirmed as Christ, and a glossing over of the identity of the historical Jesus can be gleaned from the majority of the Modules (especially numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). It is noticeable that Modules 5, 9, and 10 refrained from defining the Christ-identity and emphasized the historical Jesus (a healer, ‘miracle-worker’, minister to sinners) who was intent on carrying out his mission to make present the vision of the Kingdom of God. In other words, the Jesus proclaimed is the one who realized through his words and deeds the vision that brought about justice and liberation for the poor and oppressed. Despite its statement that the ministry of Jesus foretastes the Second Coming, the brand of his justice and liberation is qualified to bring historical wholeness, integral well-being, and welfare. This marks the meaning of the kingdom of God as well-grounded in history, one that belongs to the discourse of Low Christologies⁷ that claim Jesus’ presence as a touch of the divine. In turn, we humans become aware of our

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster ebook, 2012), part I, chapter 1.

⁷ The historical Jesus is the focus of Low Christologies or Christologies from below. Such studies begin with Jesus of Nazareth, considered a man, and then move on to consider his theological identity, his significance, and his place in the promise of divine salvation. See Wesley J. Wildman, “Basic Christological Distinctions,” *Theology Today* 64, no. 3 (2007): 287.

own being in the presence of the mediator who bridges the Christ of faith.

Nevertheless, the more historical treatment of Jesus' ministry to the poor is either absent or overlooked in Modules 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. This does not mean, however, that such modules are teaching erroneous knowledge. They are teaching what we may call the perspectival emphasis on the other-worldly promise of the Kingdom of God; in the process, they tend to play down the this-world, grounded, meaning that communicates the sensuous acts of care and mercy that aid and facilitate the observable transformation and responses of people. Most of the modules do not fail to communicate the language of compassion and/or care—yet, they are presented to students as formal concepts for intellectual reception, seemingly enough to emphasize the cost of discipleship. By not pointing out performance through the prophetic praxis of Jesus as more basic, they tend to bring to mind the importance of intellectual conversion and the primacy of devotion that sends one to the promised other-world via Christ's redemptive sacrifice. The performance dimension of faith involved in transforming praxis is not given its most basic, foundational, importance; thus, we see Modules 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 implicitly favoring the illuminative and fiducial dimensions of religion.⁸

We can observe a tension between the power of linguistic concepts that require intellectual assent and the force of foundational touch that calls for embodied involvement. This could be further discussed via the

⁸ For a discussion on the aspects of faith (devotion/trust, enlightenment, and ethical performance), see Avery Dulles, "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in John C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, 10-46, especially 23-31 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1977).

tension between the sense of sight with its lead toward the deduction of ideas, on the one hand, and that of the sense of touch that grounds every moment of thought, on the other hand.

The sense of sight may be regarded as superior as it makes it possible for humans to rise above the other senses that serve lower desires. Sight arrives at the transcendent, expressing one's highest ability to rationalize and eventually contemplate in full trust that which it defines as eternal. This could be a sweeping hierarchy that overlooks the sense of touch which is most basic as it makes thought possible, as well as love, kindness, and compassion. In tenderly touching others, we are not perched on a higher position of control and dominion that is implied in transcendental perception. We are active as well as passive when we are both traversing and get traversed by the other's sensible presence. This is a dialogical relationship with other beings, even expressing respect for particularities and singularities. We communicate and respond to the world that perhaps suffers or experiences joy and hope. We are not detached from all of these like the incarnate Word cannot but be vulnerable to tactile communications. The sense of sight may take the stance of domination as the gaze above what can be touched, leading toward abstractions, conceptual formulations, and symbolic representations. This has the danger of losing degrees of touch and vulnerability. The prison structure of the panopticon in strategic discipline and punishment also evokes a similar sense of control and dominion that cannot be the gesture that Jesus would have taken and cannot be that since he journeyed through paths and spaces of compassion and care. However, a pious devotion to Jesus may develop among believers and also become a way of putting our unconditional trust in the divine. This could pronounce dependence and develop a total

submission to God which gives way to a certain definition of faith. Both the intellectual assent and gesture of dependence (illuminative and fiducial aspects) do not, however, constitute the more concrete and embodied response to the call to participate in the mission of Jesus (“Come, follow me.” Mk 4:19; “For I was hungry and you gave me food...” Mt. 25:35ff; “Go and do likewise.” Lk 10:37). If such sensuous presence and ministrations cannot be fully expressed or strongly evoked via abstractions and pious devotions, then Jesus' identity and prophetic ministry become muddled or fetishized in doctrines and piety. It seems that it is via his historical involvement (performance aspect of faith) that we may be able to apprehend his relevance to the so-called history of salvation.

Consequently, a historical approach to the study of the kind of ministry that Jesus extended to the poor needs the proper account of the dynamics related to power, prestige, alliances, and wealth distribution within the socio-historical context of poverty and oppression. This is necessary to show the more documented situation of suffering experienced by the poor (missing in most modules) which is important in making more sense of Jesus' emphasis on compassion (and mercy) for the concrete (not imagined) needy and socially excluded individuals—giving way (compassion as pathway) to a better understanding of the ministry of care and the proper weighing up of the cost of discipleship.

Let us now turn to some studies, especially those of Richard Horsley, that reveal the importance and significance of examining and understanding the historical Jesus and his vision of the Reign of God.

Jesus' Vision of the Reign of God

“The teaching and preaching of Jesus centered on the

Kingdom of God, dynamic symbol of God's active presence among His people."⁹ Jesus proclaimed this ruling presence of God through his ministry that aims at the renewal of the people within the Israelite tradition and fulfillment of their hopes for a new deliverance. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Reign of God¹⁰ is the central theme of Jesus' preaching.¹¹ It is at the heart of Jesus' mission and ministry. In John's Gospel, it is exemplified in the "bold portrayal of Jesus as "the Messiah" leading the people in renewal and resistance, which is a distinctive view among the Gospels."¹² In the epistles of Paul, "Jesus is the center of God's kingdom plan and one must believe in Him to inherit the kingdom."¹³

⁹ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, new ed. (Word & Life Publications: Manila Philippines, 1997), 481. See Christopher D. Marshall, *Kingdom Come: The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 41-57.

¹⁰ The Reign of God is a better translation of βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ since the Greek word for the kingdom (*basileia*) lies in the Aramaic term *malkut*, which Jesus may have used. *Malkut* refers primarily to authority, reign, or the exercise of sovereign power and not to a geographical area or realm nor the people inhabiting the realm; the emphasis is on the ruling presence of God. The idea is better conveyed in English by an expression such as kingship, rule, sovereignty, or reign. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2816; https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Kingdom_of_God#:~:text=The%20Kingdom%20of%20God%20or,message%20in%20the%20synoptic%20Gospels.

¹¹ Edward Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus: A Guide to the Four Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36. See Michael John Hooton, *Four Gospels, One Christ: The Public Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

¹² Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 154.

¹³ Michael J. Vlach, "The Kingdom of God in Paul's Epistles," *Masters Seminary Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 59, <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/tmsj26e.pdf>.

Richard Horsley's works, which display an ideal scholarly rigor and cover a broad range of New Testament topics, converge on the core vision of Jesus of Nazareth. Horsley underscores the landscape of Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom, a mission that encompassed the religious, political, and socio-economic realms. He has opted for a historical approach for a grounded understanding and fitting interpretation of the historical Jesus who emphasized Israel's renewal of covenantal loyalty with God.¹⁴

Horsley's Interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth's Vision

Jesus of Nazareth's ministry was carried out both in ancient Palestine and, by implication, in the Roman Empire. He was a figure not isolated from the struggles and sufferings of the people of Israel under the Roman powers.¹⁵

According to Horsley, Jesus was interpreted and depoliticized by our society. He "has been reduced to merely a religious figure."¹⁶ As a result of modernity's habit of separating state and religion as well as dividing

¹⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003), 98. See Donald B Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2018), 18-29, 162; Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 57-81; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 93-102; Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 23-36; Nicholas Perrin and Jonathan Lunde, eds. *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 54-114.

¹⁵ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the lifeworld concerns into separate academic disciplines' concentrations (economics, politics, religion, etc.), Jesus became isolated from his social relevance, political-economic relationships, and importance in the Roman Empire context. Jesus was viewed "as an individual figure independent of the social relations in which he was embedded, dealt mainly with other individuals, not with social groups and political institutions."¹⁷ Jesus' teachings were assumed like separated or floating utterances. In effect, Jesus' ministry tended to be disconnected from the historical conditions of life under the Roman Empire.

Horsley constantly proposed interpreting the historical Jesus' mission along the fundamental societal division between rulers and ruled to comprehend the circumstances in which the early Jesus ministry formed and developed. He encouraged interpreters to be mindful of the political-economic structure of Israelite peoples to appreciate Jesus' response and resistance to various oppressive forces. He underscored that it is essential to cast aside the modern inference about the separation of religion from political-economic affairs. He further stressed that the immediate Palestinian context of Jesus' mission was highly politicized, filled with periodic widespread unrest and protests, movements, and outright revolts against the imperial order that the Romans had imposed. Jesus must be appreciated through his constant social interaction with people who, in response, reciprocate by embracing and supporting his ministry.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7. See Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 25.

Clarifying the Context of the Poor in Ancient Palestine

Horsley's works were mindful of the Roman Empire's rule characterized by persecutions, executions (crucifixion),¹⁸ repression, cultural hegemony, patronage at the expense of the peripheries, and the collaborations of the religious and local leaders who were in power.

It can be granted that the people welcomed the new Roman imperial order that enabled them to be relieved from more than a decade of empire-wide civil war between rival warlords. Indeed, this may have given them a sense of hope, peace, and prosperity, fulfilling the hopes and longings of all humankind.¹⁹ Nevertheless, a vast majority of people who were now under the Roman imperial order also meant economic and political (even religious) subjection.²⁰

Octavian, the acclaimed world Savior, placed the Roman state, senate, and people under his power. He assumed the majestic new name, Augustus Caesar. His

¹⁸ See Woodrow Michael Kroll, *Roman Crucifixion and the Death of Jesus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 44-64; Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 7ff.; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 4: Law and Love* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 13-14; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 28-30; Richard A. Horsley, "The Death of Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluation of the State of Current Research*, Bruce D. Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds. (Leiden: Brill (1994), 395-422.

¹⁹ Peter Astbury Brunt and J.M. Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 35. See Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 22.

²⁰ Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiah: Popular Movement in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc., 1985), 45.

reign ensured the boundaries of the Roman Empire as the boundaries of the earth. He ruled his kingdom under the influence of his imperial political-military power as he was subjecting the people he conquered to his political agenda. Roman leaders under his empire imposed fear and conformity. Coercion and persuasion among the masses were their chief means of social control, even crucifying subjects who dared to resist Roman rule.²¹

Augustus' empire was overwhelming as its power was not only meant to maintain order but also to threaten and dominate all aspects of the conquered peoples' lives. The domination compounded the flow of resources from conquered peoples and provinces consequently leading to or exacerbating further the massive poverty of communities and villages.²² Most of the inhabitants under Roman imperialism were urban poor folks who lived between survival and crisis levels. Poverty under Roman imperialism became a way of life for most peasant

²¹ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins Press, 2007), 105. See also, John Storey, ed., *Livy, History of Rome I: A Selection* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 4-6; Katharine Radice and Roland Mayer, eds., *Tacitus Annals I: A Selection* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 2-10; Brunt and Moore, eds., *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 12-31; Jennifer Wright Knust, "Paul and Politics of Virtue and Vice," in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, 161; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 22; Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 17.

²² Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 3 (2004): 323-61; Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 17-36.

societies.²³

Horsley's works provided the landscape of how the Roman reconquests were more violent and destructive than the initial conquest.²⁴ The siphoning of resources from subjugated peoples and provinces for the imperial metropolis compounded the wealth accumulation of Rome. The empire boosted military reconquests, demand for tribute, and imposition of client rulers among their dominated populace. The reluctance or delayed contribution to the tribute resulted in being sold and enslaved. The varied violence and exploitation, such as the destruction of villages, killing, enslavement, and the like, brought individual and communal suffering and trauma to the people in the dominated villages.²⁵

"Compounding the impact of imperial violence, the drain of economic resources from villagers by the demands for tribute, taxes, and tithes by multiple layers of rulers led to irrecoverable indebtedness, loss of land, and resulting to the disintegration of families and village communities."²⁶ To survive their daily lives, villagers

²³ For a more nuanced study, see Bruce W. Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 3 (2009): 243-278, doi: 10.1177/0142064X08101524; see also Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

²⁴ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 20. See also Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Frankfurt, Germany: BoD—Books on Demand, 2018), 961-964.

²⁵ See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 91; Anthony Keddie, *Class and Power in Roman Palestine: The Socio-Economic Setting of Judaism and Christian Origins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111-132.

²⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine*, 90. See Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 80; Horsley and Thatcher, *John*,

would borrow money at high interest rates. Ultimately, they lose control of their ancestral lands as payment to their creditors. The wealthy and powerful could bring villagers under their control to exact additional revenues and even take control over their land.

Rome's elite (in terms of power, wealth, and status) guaranteed hegemony over the surrounding territories with their imposing buildings displayed in every city. Their oppressive authority and dominance delivered an image of peace and an ordered state, popularly known as the Pax Romana.

The hegemonic Roman rule led to generalized oppression. As subjected peoples, the peasants and villagers became powerless.²⁷ Horsley also emphasized how the Roman emperor's political power was embedded in religious temples, shrines, images, sacrifices, and festivals, aside from the armies, taxes, and administrative apparatus.²⁸ Such was the context of Jesus' ministry.

Clarifying the Nature of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus' ministry was carried out not isolated from the struggles and sufferings of the people of Israel under the Roman powers.²⁹ It is rooted in his dedication and

Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel, 140; Rollin A. Ramsaran, "Resisting Imperial Domination and Influence: *Paul's Apocalyptic Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians*," in Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2004), 89-101; Neil Elliot, "Romans 13:1-7 in the Context of Imperial Propaganda," in Horsley, ed. *Paul and Empire*, 184-204.

²⁷ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 20ff; see also, Keddie *Class and power in Roman Palestine: The Socio-Economic Setting of Judaism and Christian Origins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 111-132.

²⁸ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 23; Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 6.

²⁹ Horsley, *Empowering the People*, 447-86.

commitment to people experiencing poverty and oppression. He also posed a prophetic challenge against the imperial power and its local clients and temple collaborators. Horsley illuminated Jesus' ministry against the background of the social challenges and transformations needed to deal with a world reeling under a hegemonic rule. He consistently portrayed how Jesus saw and felt the suffering of God's people. He is an inseparably political-economic religious agent of justice and peace in the lives of many Israelites under Roman imperialism. For Horsley, Jesus dealt with the devastating effects of imperial violence and economic exploitation.³⁰

Jesus' mission has rejuvenated the people's Israelite tradition of community spirit of caring and support within the villages.³¹ Jesus made God's presence on the side of those who do not have honor or place and are shamed or excluded by society as poor, sinners, unclean, and illiterate. Jesus' company with them provided hope in their desperate condition. He invited them to participate in mutual community support and cooperation to address the problem of family and community disintegration.³²

Horsley underlines that, in contrast to Roman imperialism, Jesus pronounced the vitality of ensuring the socio-economic needs of persons and respecting the dignity of every individual. He lived and proclaimed the nobility and essentiality of generosity, cooperation, and

³⁰ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 104; Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 106-8; Horsley, *Empowering the People*, 32-34.

³¹ Richard A. Horsley, "Like One of the Prophets of Old: Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July, 1985): 452.

³² Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Society of Biblical Literature 2004), 73.

mutual sharing of resources. Jesus' healing and exorcism also offered hope to people.³³ He delivered them from the "ugly underside of the Pax Romana."³⁴ His heart belonged to the bottom of the social ladder, whose lives are degraded because of the primacy of money, honor, power, and exclusive friendships or narrow solidarities.

Jesus showered the lowly with God's goodness, mercy, compassion and care. He showed everyone his inclusive compassion so that, by his caring example, others would do the same. To overcome the embedded stigma among outcasts of society, he embodied his message of sincere empathy with and care for the suffering people.³⁵

Clarifying the Meaning of the Kingdom of God

Horsley showed that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God is centered on the values identified with God's presence as taught and lived by Jesus himself. It is a vision of God's presence that nurtures relationships in building community and fostering social awareness, commitment, and active involvement in rejecting and eradicating any forms of oppression and suffering. It also facilitates an inclusive community spirit wherein everyone is motivated to respond as brothers and sisters under the direct rule of God. It is a life under God's presence that aims to reverse the emperor's reign.

For Horsley, Jesus' mission is realized when God is

³³ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 164; see also Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 35-45.

³⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 106. See Richard A. Horsley, "Centralization of Political-Economic Power and the Generation of Poverty: The Mission of Jesus," *Journal of Religion & Society Supplementary Series* no. 10 (2014): 83-103.

³⁵ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 34-43. See Jon Sobrino, "Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context: Compassion, Hope, and Following the Light of the Cross," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 437-460.

recognized as the real sovereign. As the true savior of the world, Jesus contrasts sharply with the acclaimed savior-lord of the ruling empire, who reigned over people out of fear and domination. Jesus mediates God's forgiveness of sins in contrast to the temple-based system³⁶ that emphasizes sin-transgression to enhance motivation for recourse to purification rituals required by the temple. As the true savior, Jesus' mode of ministry symbolized his program of opposition to the imperial order. Jesus' presence and ministry, including his martyrdom, became the concrete expression of God's reign.

In Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God, he inspired the people to free their hearts from greed and self-seeking. He encouraged them to love and respect others by being just, cooperative, and in solidarity with people in need. Jesus reversed the enslaving and corrupting power of the empire leaders and their local cohorts. He inspired them to place their trust in God's goodness and rely not upon property, honor, exclusive friendships/solidarities, and power.³⁷

Historic Significance and Implications for Discipleship and Ministry

If Jesus would be considered (assumed) as a model of liberating ministry and one who inspires and makes possible an ideal quality of personal or communal life, it

³⁶ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 3: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 639-40. See Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, 73.

³⁷ Richard A. Horsley, "You Shall Not Bow Down and Serve Them: Economic Justice in the Bible," *A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69, no. 4 (2015): 415-431. See Richard Horsley, "Popular Prophetic Movements at the Time of Jesus: Their Principal Features and Social Origins," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 8 (1986): 3-27.

requires delving into his historical character—a historical model of virtue who can be imitated and not just piously worshipped. Although his historical actions and pronouncements cannot be separated from his identity as a messiah or savior-Lord, Jesus is a historical figure who deserves to be regarded as an example of virtue or a paragon of noble character for humanity. One cannot just assume to know his human character without placing him right in historical situations that are two millennia detached from us.

A clear and factual understanding of the situation of suffering experienced by the poor is indispensable to help in making more sense of Jesus' emphasis on compassion (and mercy) for the needy and excluded—giving way to a ministry of care (cf. the caring gestures of the Good Samaritan as the neighbor to the needy).³⁸ Questions about the actual situation of suffering experienced by the poor need the data provided by the sociological and historical sciences about the poor's condition under the Roman Empire with its lackeys in Israel. Jesus' compassion for the poor (suffering from material and sociological poverty) cannot just be imagined through the brief and general information provided by the biblical texts. The historical conditions of the poor's sufferings during Jesus' time are important information for comparing and contrasting today's experiences of human suffering that also evoke compassion. There has to be

³⁸ See Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "The Good Samaritan Parable and Helping Behavior Narratives in Emergency Situations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of Mutual Illumination," *Louvain Studies* 46, no. 2 (2023): 191-212. See also, Cecilia Wassen, "Jesus' Table Fellowship with 'Toll Collectors and Sinners,'" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14, no. 137 (2016): 137-157; Johanon Flusser, *The Rabbinic Parables and Jesus the Parable Teller* (ebook edition), translated by Timothy Keiderling (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2024), 112ff.

some factual data that would show the extent of poverty, domination, exclusion, and discrimination observed by Jesus and gripped his deep sense of compassion.

One thing to remember is that Jesus' ministry about the Good News of the Kingdom of God carries with it an anti-Empire message with its implications, among others, for the proper exercise of power as well as the critical evaluation of prestige, alliances, and wealth distribution. During the time of Jesus, the Emperor proclaimed himself as the Good News and the Son of God. Thus, for Jesus to concretize his vision of the Kingdom of God is also to form a gesture that directly goes against the oppressive imperial claims. Knowing this would imply a kind of present-day ministry that should also go against today's empires that dominate or overpower life-worlds and peoples.

Various studies have failed to delve deeper into specific deep-structural causes of the poor's suffering during Jesus' time. The works of Horsley have assisted us in clarifying the causes and nature of such suffering. These also aided in clarifying the nature of the ministry of compassionate care as having a transcendent character for it announces the presence of God. This present study, aided by Horsley and other authors, makes us aware that discipleship and the Kingdom of God are not only talking about the ministry of caring but also about the place of the divine taking place on the ground and in the agency of people. The divine, therefore, moves in various places at all times when people become neighbors to their fellow and thereby proclaim the Reign of God.

Conclusion

The proclamation of God's Reign is the fundamental theme of Jesus' mission throughout his public ministry. The vision of God's Reign is heard, lived, and shared in

the community that brings peace and order to all things and all humanity. Christian Living Education modules must be connected to and revitalized in Jesus' vision of God the Father's Reign and to make it the heart of the CLE modules/curriculum. To communicate this goal and hope, returning to the historical Jesus of Nazareth during Ancient Palestine's subjugation under the Roman Empire is key to rejuvenating the CLE curriculum especially its insistence on discipleship or imitation of the ways of Jesus. The learner's faith journey will be enlightened further on how Jesus perfectly embodied, modeled, and communicated his vision. Engaging the learning activities in CLE with the historical condition of life in Jesus' time will uplift the learners to open their eyes, minds, and hearts to the challenges of their generation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Ferdinand D. Dagmang serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *MST Review* and is a co-author of this article. The peer-review process was conducted rigorously and externally. The final editorial process, including the decision to publish, was handled independently by Alvenio Mozol, the Managing Editor. The author-editor was entirely excluded from the peer-review and editorial decision-making process.

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