Foreword

The complexity of ancient economics (taxes, loans, debts, sureties, trade, markets) seems on its face to have little to do with Jesus and his prayer. But Doug Oakman's work—not only in this volume, but in his work over the past thirty years—has shown that these issues are fundamental to understanding what Jesus was up to, what his central concerns were, and what the problems were that he addressed in many of his sayings and parables.

What Oakman does here is to bring to the reader's attention the economic issues that plagued first-century Galilean and Judean peasants in their agrarian world. The issues of indebtedness, loss of land, and heavy taxation loomed large, and the urban elites—in Rome, Jerusalem, Tiberias, and elsewhere—could benefit greatly in this system. What Oakman does so well is to move from the details of the larger picture regarding the systemic structures and historical events and players to the ways in which Jesus articulated a response to them.

The bookshelves are crowded with volumes old and new studying the historical Jesus and his sayings, and some of them, in my estimation, are very good. But most of what one finds on those shelves is either a tweaking of older approaches or the repetition of pious platitudes about Jesus. What Oakman offers in these brief chapters is a fresh look at some of the core sayings of Jesus, including the Lord's Prayer, with a view to the economic situation of first-century Galilee and Judea.

How would what Jesus says to those who heard him speak sound differently if we seriously listened to and understood the implications of debt, the huge gap between peasants and urban elites, and the heavy burden of tax obligations in that society?

Jesus was not crucified because he taught pious platitudes—who would have cared? He was not crucified because he had a different take on traditional Israelite law—lots of Judean teachers of his day and later had major disagreements on these issues. He was crucified because what he had to say was perceived as a fundamental challenge to the status quo, and that included his comments on debt and taxation.

Oakman does not claim to have the last word on the Jesus traditions. What he does offer, however, is a challenge to take seriously the economic and broad social implications of what Jesus had to say. Personally, I cannot read the gospels the same way after reading Oakman's work.

—K. C. Hanson