

Review of

The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century¹

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Section three of this volume, “The Social History of Christ-Confessing Communities in the Cities of the Roman Empire,” which consists of four chapters, argues right from the introduction that the communities of believers in Jesus outside of the land of Israel were, “on sociological grounds” as well as geographical, so different from those within it that even the way these two groups are labeled should be distinguished. Hence, the authors write of Christ-confessing communities or churches, not messianic followers of Jesus (251). If you are familiar with my own work, you will anticipate that this conclusion invites a challenge.

Chapter 9, “The Concept and Basic Characteristics of Christ-confessing Communities,” discusses the Pauline communities as *ekklesia*. The authors stress that its first meaning is to gather together, to assemble, which probably is analogous to popular political assemblies of their cities. In addition, it signifies the communal dimension of the Christ-believers’ reciprocal social interaction outside of meetings, as an organized group. The social setting of these groups is understood to be urban, and they are characterized as promoting “unrestricted” social interaction.

Various emic models of group formation, such as the household, voluntary associations, philosophical schools, synagogues, and popular political gatherings are explored for analogies, as well as etic analytical categories, including millennium movements, sects, cults, and groups. Attention is focussed upon the self-understanding of the original groups, rather than those to be found among later Christian communities. Comparisons and contrasts between the Christ-confessors’ communities and those of the public assembly are explored. I find the similarities noted, such as the

¹ Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann (transl. O. C. Dean, Jr.; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999).

speeches and cultic activities, more compelling than the differences, especially the sharp distinction made between the purpose of the Christ-confessors assembling together as *community forming*, as though the others are not (275-76). Is it not just as likely that the public assembly of citizens, not to mention assembling in synagogues, results in “strengthening, preservation, development, confirmation, and manifestation of the community itself as well as of the individuals in it” (276)? The authors conclude that the Christ-believers’ communities, which met in houses, were essentially fictive kinship groups, and assembled like fictive political institutions (286).

A substantial preliminary text by which the separation of Christ-believers from Judaism is deduced, around which all of this section turns, warrants particular discussion. The Stegemanns propose that the problem at Antioch in Galatians 2:11-14 was “*unrestricted* social interaction of Jews with non-Jews” (267-71). What the Stegemanns mean by *unrestricted* is that unlike other Jewish groups, wherein Gentiles, when they ate with Jews, did so according to Jewish customs—thus “restricted”—that Jews as well as Gentiles in the Christ-believing groups ate *apart from Jewish dietary restrictions*. But does that constitute “unrestricted,” or is that “restricted” in the opposite direction, that is, to universalizing as Christian what are essentially Gentile as opposed to Jewish norms and terms for social interaction? In that case, it is not so much that social interaction was unrestricted for which they argue, but non-Jewish. And if it was so, that would justify seeking to explain the Christ-believing groups as moving quickly away from prevailing Jewish norms of identity, deviant enough that it would not take long for the social processes of discipline and then exclusion to run their course. But would it justify the conclusion that all or most or even any of the Christ-confessing communities began independent of Jewish communities or Judaisms?

The Stegemanns admit that it is not clear whether “the problem of common meals concerns the participating *people* or the *foods*” (268). They recognize that the text does not indicate food per se but only the practice of eating together with non-Jews, to which some special interest group—“the circumcision faction”—objects. They also observe that surely Jews did eat with non-Jews, and conclude that it must not be the inclusion of non-Jews per se, such as might occur if the hosts were Jewish, but rather the food and wine, and non-Jewish hosts who did not offer Jewish options. In support is cited the accusation that Peter “previously lived in Gentile fashion and now wants to compel the Gentiles to live as Jews” (269). From this interpretive translation it is

inferred “that Peter wanted to continue the table fellowship of Christ-confessing Jews with non-Jews under the condition that the latter hold to *Jewish* food laws.” Earlier, Peter is understood to have “crossed over the previous boundaries of Judaism (regarding food laws)” (271). This is surprising to me, since it would seem then that, once Peter has withdrawn to eat with other Jews, presumable Jewish food, the non-Jews need not be excluded from the meals according to common Jewish communal norms, but simply come and eat Jewish food at a Jewish home. But that is not the thing of which Peter is accused, nor is it of requiring a change of diet or eating location. And it is not an option of which the non-Jews seem to be aware, or to be considering. Instead, Paul writes that the non-Jews left behind are being compelled to *judaize*, which, in the context of the concerns of the interest group which Peter is said to fear, indicates that the non-Jews now excluded understand the need to become not merely eaters or, when hosts, servers of Jewish food, but proselytes, to judaize.² And yet Paul does not accuse Peter of teaching them to do this, which would constitute the cause for an accusation of heresy or apostasy, but of betraying them to this logical conclusion by his hypocrisy. Peter is accused of not recognizing or at least not giving sufficient attention to the fact that attempting to mask his convictions for the moment undermined the principle truth of the message of Christ that Peter otherwise upheld (contra Esler).

I submit that the issue revolved around the presence of non-Jews at this Jewish group’s meals—regardless of their conformity with Jewish meal-time practices—because *these* particular non-Jews were *not* being treated by *this* Jewish group in *the same way* that non-Jewish *guests* were being treated at *other* Jewish-groups’ meals in Antioch. Here they were being identified as already *equal co-participants* in the people of God *apart* from completing—even initiating—proselyte conversion. If so, this would explain the source of the problem to which Paul refers: a special interest group, having learned of this breach of prevailing Jewish communal norms, had begun intensively advocating proselyte conversion for these non-Jews *if* they were to continue to be treated as more than mere guests, and threatened reprisals for continued non-compliance. For at other Jewish tables non-Jews were welcome, but not as co-

² M. Nanos, “What Was at Stake in Peter’s ‘Eating with Gentiles’ at Antioch,” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation* (ed. M. Nanos; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 282-318, esp. 306-16; idem, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 352-55; P. Esler, *Galatians* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 137.

participants in the people of God, until they became proselytes, or at least began the process. The position these advocates held is in keeping with long-standing tradition based on Scripture, a social convention even accepted by the non-Jewish social leaders, with whose interests minority Jewish communities needed to be concerned. So Peter withdrew, along with the other Jewish members of this coalition, in order to mask the public implications of his convictions, symbolized by these joint meals. For the Christ-believing coalition's decision to collapse this category boundary represented a threat to the traditional and prevailing ordering of reality within Jewish groups, and it was, to the degree that it included refraining from participation in idolatrous family and civic meals, a threat to the majority communities' understanding of the exception made for Jewish group members in their societies.

This explanation fits well with Douglas's conclusion in the article the Stegemanns cite, that "the ordered system which is a meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it. Hence the strong arousal power of a threat to weaken or confuse that category."³ I believe that it was the confusion of the category of who constitutes the people of God maintained by this Jewish subgroup, which they legitimated by their understanding that in Jesus Christ the awaited age had begun—when Jew and Gentile would be united in the worship of the One God as Jew *and* Gentile—and not the mere presence of Gentile guests, Gentiles hosting the meals, or some kind of inappropriate food, that led to the opposition of the leaders of the larger Jewish groups, albeit minority groups themselves in terms of their social location in the city of Antioch.⁴ At the very least, I think that this text, which supports such a contrary reading and implications, should not be expected to support that which the Stegemanns' propose.

³ M. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 273.

⁴ The work of Mary Douglas is noted to make the point that "specific foods are encoded social events" ("Deciphering a Meal," 268). Actually, the issue is broader as described by Douglas, as well as by other anthropologists: much more than the choice of *food* signifies the social relationships and the boundaries of the participants. There are also matters such as the place and time of the meal, which includes drink as well as food, the sequence and number of courses, whether it is a minor or major meal or occasion, who is invited, how they are seated, even the portions they are served, including the amount of water mixed with their wine. There is no reason to limit the investigation to food; it is about eating together, the meal and all that it encompasses, including the identities of the participants. See discussions in M. Nanos, "What Was at Stake," in *The Galatians Debate*, 282-318; idem, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 152-54; idem, *Mystery of Romans*, 337-71.

After discussing the present state of research and conflicting emphases upon the early Christ-believers as either lower stratum or of more mixed strata, chapter 10 addresses the social composition of Paul's churches as well as Paul's own social status, and then that of the urban Christ-confessing communities after 70 C.E. The so-called authentic letters of Paul are analyzed for material about Paul's period, and Acts is left for post 70, along with the Gospels and other NT texts. The hypothetical social stratification the Stegemann's advance for Paul's communities considers the prosopographic data of the few individuals named in his letters (indicating origins, status, financial situation connected with personal names or other information provided), alongside the indirect elements that can be gleaned from them. Seldom, if ever, do the authors find Paul addressing socio-economic problems among his audiences, and even that which does seem to be confronted, as at 1 Cor 11:17ff., is understood to be a conflict among the lower stratum (295), which I find unconvincing.⁵ They deduce evidence of a cross-section of lower-stratum members who live above absolute poverty, and take the direct mention of this in Macedonian churches to be exaggerated rhetoric (2 Cor 8:2), since they participated in the collection for Jerusalem, and gave support to Paul. It does seem to me that the evidence is pressed toward the middle, when it can just as easily be argued to signify representation of most strata, certainly the very poor.⁶

My favorite discussion offers a comparison of the social position of Paul conveyed in Acts with that gleaned from his letters (297-302). The combination of Roman citizenship, usually limited to urban élite among provincials in the early imperial period, and education as a Pharisee, retainers of the upper stratum, characterize the Lukan Paul. It is observed that if Paul's father was a Roman in Tarsus, this would have posed significant problems for him as a Jew, certainly a Torah-true Jew or Pharisee, because of the role of local élite in pagan cultic events. I am not so sure that such identity conflicts could not be successfully negotiated (consider the implications of the decrees for which Josephus argues [*Ant.* 12.119-50; 14.185-267], which mention Jewish Roman citizens [e.g., *Ant.* 14.228, 232, 234, 237, 240], and his own citizenship,

⁵ E.g., prosopographically, Erastus may be an *aedilis* (Rom 16:23), and Gaius may be wealthy (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14); see C. S. de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts* (SBLDS 168; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999) 197-203, 206-14, 224-25.

⁶ J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

although later [*Life* 423], and the local patriotism which Philo asserts [*Flaccus* 46-50], whether a Roman citizen or not, including observation of contests in the stadium and plays in the theater [*Good Person* 26, 141; *Drunkenness* 177]). They find Luke's picture of an élite Paul contradicted by his occupation as an artisan; they also note that this image of Paul is mitigated by the fact that he does not seem to rely upon his trade to finance his activities, but is able to travel and preach and even rent a school in Ephesus, and quarters while a prisoner in Rome. And, according to the Stegemanns, "no basis" for an élite social position is to be found in Paul's own letters (299). Paul does not mention his Roman citizenship, but instead that he is flogged by Roman authorities three times and by Jewish authorities five, which is difficult to reconcile with the privilege of Roman citizens to have a free "back." The authors cannot imagine that Paul forewent this privilege for religious reasons, especially since they regard this as "demeaning treatment in synagogues" (300), but this reviewer can imagine it, and I do not think that synagogue social control merely represents religious authority. I have no problem understanding Jewish communal members' and leaders' interests to be intimately connected to those of their local non-Jewish populations—in effect, to exemplify local patriotism. The authors do not accept the proposition that Paul gave up the kind of position and independence described by Luke "to identify himself with the small people of his missionary propaganda," but conclude instead that Paul's own portrait must have priority (302). I read the implications of Philippians 3 differently, but I found the exercise very interesting and informative.

The final chapter (11) in this section is entitled, "External Conflicts of Believers in Christ with Gentiles and Jews in the Diaspora." For pre-70, the Stegemanns consider as evidence Paul's letters, Suetonius's comment in *Claudius* 25.4, and Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, referring to the punishment under Nero in 64. For post-70, Revelation, the accounts in Acts, and Pliny's correspondence are the primary sources. The pre-70 evidence is extremely problematic and its interpretation questionable. The Roman writers, in the same way as Luke, post-date the period. In the case of Suetonius, he does not write of *Christus* but *Chrestus*, and Tacitus may well be describing a particular Jewish group of messianists.⁷ The evidence from Paul can, and I believe should, be understood to indicate a member of Judaism who is disciplined for maintaining disputable notions

⁷ See Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, 372-87

among his fellow-Jews, including especially how non-Jews should be identified and behave. It is thus intra- and inter-communal, but reaches beyond Jewish communal boundaries, because it involves members of the larger non-Jewish populations, and Paul's teaching threatens the status quo expectations of such non-Jewish associates from each community's point of view. I believe that Acts attests essentially intra- and inter-Jewish communal issues and identity for the Christ-believers in similar ways. It is not until Pliny's letters (c. 117) that we find the kind of Christian identity that may not be related to being a certain kind of Judaism, yet it is not clear how or if it might be related to Judean origins or interests, or how much it represents other people and places even then.

The Stegemanns discuss the history of the criminalizing of Christ-believers prior to Pliny (now referred to by the authors as Christians [324-29]), drawing a distinction between criminalization for "being a Christian in itself," found in Pliny, and that resulting from "criminal accusations," which are also indicated before him (325). They note that Pliny's fears toward the influence of these groups upon non-Jews appear similar to those of Tacitus toward Jews (327), and that in Acts the accusations of anti-Roman activities indicate continued identification as a special group within Judaism. Nevertheless, they conclude that "the basic factor in the criminalization of believers in Christ was without doubt their negative identification as a group of anti-Roman rebels *coming out of Judaism*" (327-28; emphasis added). Yet Tacitus is cited for remarking: "The notion that only the Jews persisted in their resistance increased the bitterness against them" (328; *Hist.* 5.10), and the fears of Vespasian and Domitian are understood by the Stegemanns to be toward Jewish movements that might unify with claims of a Davidic ruler. The authors recognize that Josephus' comments about the disturbances in Alexandria and elsewhere reveal the kind of implications one Jewish group's actions can have on other Jewish groups, and the intra-Jewish communal conflicts that result. But they consider the problems of the Christians to be different: even if they believed in a crucified messiah, their identification with Jewish anti-Roman interests is merely the suspicion of "a *corresponding* identification" (329; emphasis added). On the evidence adduced, Why would the Christ-believers' criminalization indicate anything rather than a group or groups that are considered by outsiders to be dangerous Jewish groups—even perhaps, for example, to a degree not suspected of some other Jews and Jewish groups throughout the Diaspora which do not make claims or behave in such

anti-Roman ways? That is, Why are the Christ-believers understood by non-Jewish authorities as “*coming out of Judaism*” rather than as foreign Jewish outgroups stereotyped negatively as representative of that which is feared about Judaism or Judeanism *par excellence*?

On pages 339-58, the Stegemanns summarize their understanding of the distancing of Diaspora Judaism from Christ-confessing communities. They state that the very real differences they observe between the experiences in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora are the result of “the fact that in the land of Israel we have a Jewish majority population to which the messianic Christian communities related as minority groups. In the Diaspora, by contrast, the members of both the synagogues and the *ekklesia* lived as minority groups in the context of pagan cities. Thus we must always keep in mind that here we have minority conflicts in which the larger entity is either the pagan population or its representatives” (339). Thereby, the authors explain why they do not consider investigating the social relations of Christ-believing communities in the Diaspora as intra- and inter-Jewish in ways that might correspond with those developing in Judea. For example, at one point in discussing the issue of persecution, they observe: “In the cities of the Roman empire, the Jewish communities, like the Christian, existed as minority groups that by no means had at their disposal the necessary means of power presupposed by the concept of persecution. The only exceptions here are intrasynagogal disciplinary measures, which presuppose, however, that the ones thus disciplined belong to Judaism and have subjected themselves to its system of discipline” (343). The Stegemanns presuppose the opposite. It is hard to square their decision with their observation elsewhere that, “In general, Paul’s activities as a persecutor and his own corresponding experiences presuppose an *intra-Jewish* conflict in which the instigators and the affected were Jews” (345). Nevertheless, the Stegemanns argue that Paul’s intra-Jewish deviance is confined to him as an individual, and not understood to reflect the situation of his communities (354-55). Thus it is concluded that the sect model is not suitable to evaluate the conflicts, since “sociologically speaking, urban Christ-confessing communities no longer belonged to Judaism” (355). It is hard for me to grasp that this kind of activity primarily indicates exclusion rather than continued inclusion, regardless of how disruptive, or that it can be confined to an individual as though an autonomous religious figure whose activities do not represent social and political connections with those whom his views represent,

even for whom his teaching and activity create group identity, as well as those with whom these group members are networked. Paul writes, after all, that it is because of his deviant social identification policies among the non-Jews of his communities that he is “persecuted” (Gal. 5:11).

Is it not historically probable that groups of Christ-believers in the Diaspora began as subgroups of the minority Jewish communities? In other words, Why must the fact that both the Christ-believers and Jewish communities represent minority groups lead to treating them as two separate entities? Does the evidence not rather suggest—expecting differences to emerge for each place and time—that, during Paul’s career the Christ-believers’ groups were subgroups of the Jewish communities, which, although constituting larger entities, still represented minority groups in terms of the larger “pagan” population?

This is a very sophisticated volume representing a great deal of work. It is perhaps ironic that in the section I am engaging, the seemingly elementary matter of how the historical social location of these minority groups are conceptualized—within or outside of Diaspora Jewish communal space vis-à-vis the larger non-Jewish population, in continuity or not with that imagined to apply to developments among the followers of Jesus in Judea—results in such profoundly different predispositions toward and readings of the same historical evidence, and thus, of the relevance of as well as implications for the various social theories discussed. I thank the Stegemanns for their contribution, and the section for inviting my review.