

Christianity Seminar: Musings on Christian Origins

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Contributors

Ron Cameron is Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Religion, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. He received his Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard University (1983). Cameron was a charter member of the Jesus Seminar (1985–1991) and served as co-chair of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Consultation (1995–1997) and Seminar (1998–2003) on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins. He is the author or editor of a number of essays on the Gospel of Thomas and book-length studies of the New Testament and Christian beginnings, including *The Cologne Mani Codex* (with Arthur J. Dewey, 1979), *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (1982), *Sayings Traditions in the Apocryphon of James* (1984, reprint 2004), *The Apocryphal Jesus and Christian Origins* (1990), *Redescribing Christian Origins* (with Merrill P. Miller, 2004), and *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians* (with Merrill P. Miller, 2011).

Maia Kotrosits is Assistant Professor of Religion, Classics, and Queer Studies at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. She received her Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York and co-chairs the steering committee of Westar’s Christianity Seminar. She has published three books, the most recent of which is *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Fortress, 2015), and has published in a wide variety of academic venues, including the *Journal of the Academy of American Religion*, *Journal of Culture and Religion*, and *The Bible and Critical Theory*.

Burton L. Mack is Professor Emeritus of the Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. An active member of the Westar Institute and Society of Biblical Literature, his focus on myth-making and the early Jesus movement has driven NT research for half a century. He has authored numerous books and articles related to the origins of early Christianity, with his best-known volumes including *A Myth of Innocence* (Fortress, 1988), *The Lost Gospel* (HarperCollins, 1993), and *Who Wrote the New Testament?* (HarperCollins, 1995).

Dennis E. Smith was Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He was Chair of the Acts Seminar and co-editor (with Joseph Tyson) of *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (Polebridge, 2013). He was also co-editor (with Hal Taussig) of

Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table (Palgrave, 2012) and author of *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Fortress, 2003), as well as numerous articles on various aspects of Christian origins.

Preface

In the spring of 2016 the Christianity Seminar focused its efforts on a renewed discussion of “origins” within the early Christian movement. The roots of this enterprise have been extensively researched in recent decades, yet the light of such work has yielded promising suggestions about the early Jesus movement that demand further consideration and exploration. As such, it seemed appropriate here to solicit additional comments and research data on this important topic.

As an essential component of this task, the Seminar turned toward specific examination of the career contributions of Burton L. Mack, who currently stands as John Wesley Professor Emeritus in early Christianity at the Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. Mack’s undaunted quests to explore the early church’s formation have appeared variously in significant publications, including key well-regarded volumes such as *A Myth of Innocence* (1988), *The Lost Gospel* (1993), and *Who Wrote the New Testament?* (1995). His insights into the rise of nascent Christian consciousness have had tremendous impact on scholarship devoted to NT studies and early patristic formation. His career deserves review and respect for its impact.

The present issue opens with a paper by Mack himself that was delivered as a challenge to how we see the influence of studies related to the roots of the NT on the formation of later Christian awareness in contemporary American society. His suggestions indicate that much of what academic scholarship has achieved in biblical studies is essentially being lost to the larger institutional church’s world because of how politics and economics have altered the direction of Western society’s view of itself as Christian. It is a sobering challenge indeed.

Thereafter appear two papers that respond to Mack’s career and work. The first is by Ron Cameron (Wesleyan University), who discusses in critical detail the various contributions provided to scholarship by Mack’s efforts. Cameron succinctly diagnoses each movement within Mack’s developing train of thought related to social consciousness in the first-century Jesus movement’s rise to the public stage. He speaks of “origins” and “redescription” as essential components of how the Mack agenda has reshaped contemporary ideas about first-century Jewish views as they produced our NT literature and beyond. His bibliography of resources includes a large offering of Mack’s writings and is not to be missed.

The second response is offered by Maia Kotrosits (Denison University) and is directed more specifically to Mack's own paper contained in this issue as it relates to his earlier insights and career. Kotrosits speaks of the processes of "myth-making" and models of "the Christian myth" that Mack has provided as guidelines for understanding early Christian origins. While accepting facets of this contribution, she likewise offers challenges to those who would paint the first-century world in broad brush strokes without consideration of broader details and contexts. In the final analysis, she accepts his call to be "interdisciplinary" in perspective, noting the importance of such efforts for future research.

Finally, this issue concludes with two related essays by Dennis E. Smith (late Professor Emeritus of Phillips Theological Seminary), who passed away on 16 September 2017 in Galveston, Texas related to complications from his long fight with cancer. His contributions to this issue were rendered for publication in the last days of his life and, with his traditional focus on meal settings in the early house church, seemed a fitting addition for this issue's focus on Christian origins. Smith has included first-account photographs to illustrate the archaeological evidence for his views concerning ancient meals, as well as extensive analyses of biblical scenarios in which the "invitation" to dine illustrates the ancient world's concern for hospitality and the early Jesus movement's attempts to include all classes of society into its fold. His comments on the Gospel of Mark form ready parallels to Mack's own research in this regard. We will miss him dearly, both as a steady contributor to the *Forum* and as an enthusiastic colleague.

The Quest for Christian Origins

Burton Mack

Christian Origins is the name of a project that NT scholars have undertaken in the interest of understanding Christianity as a social and historical religion. This project has been pursued in one form or another for about 300 years. One might think that there could be nothing left to discover about the NT and the beginnings of Christianity. But no. New questions, methods of research, and findings keep stacking up, as if we were not yet sure what generated Christianity, or what Christianity may be that still needs to be clarified, or what its origins can tell us about it.

There was a student studying John Kloppenborg's Q text, apparently troubled by the thought that the people of Q had not mentioned the crucifixion. Since the crucifixion must have been an important datum of Christian origins and since the Q people surely must have been early Christians, a closer look at the teachings was called for. As the student reported to me about his research, he was quite proud of finding a way to argue from the text that the Q people *did* know about Jesus' crucifixion. I did not ask him to show me the text. But it was clear that the Christian Origins project had been vindicated once again.

The embarrassment is that the student already had a picture of Christian Origins in his mind, and assumed that the NT writings by the "early Christians" should confirm it. This is a type of biblical scholarship that has produced many such examples in the course of its tradition, many much more sophisticated than the student's project. It works with a familiarity with the Christianity that developed centuries later and that then functioned as the cultural mythology of Western civilizations until modern times. The curiosity is that the Bible was not important as the historical record of Christian Origins until the Protestant Reformation. And even then its importance was mainly to lay claim to the Christian tradition independently from Catholicism, not to define Christianity as a social-historical religion. The reformers took the Bible with them when they left the Catholic Church, leaving behind its rituals, canon laws, pieties, and practices, but wanting to think of themselves still as Christians. The Bible was all they had in hand to make the claim that they were Christians. With the NT in hand they had entrée to the mythic world of Christianity apart from the Mass, the priests, and the pope. The sacred book was used for the Protestant rituals of breaking bread, baptism, and preaching without the Catholic confessionals and homilies. This actually enhanced the importance of the Bible for Protestants beyond its erstwhile sacral functions in Catholicism. The Renaissance and

Enlightenment had generated interest in the Greek "classical" tradition, the awareness of "history," the significance of "literature," and literacy. This meant that the Protestant focus on the Bible amounted to a step into the Renaissance and a leap over the years of Christendom to land at the gospel origins of Christianity with the Bible in hand. It was this leap that gave the notion of "origins" its authority as a category for thinking about the generation and definition of Christianity in the subsequent academies of the West. Historians of religion are now aware that there is no such thing as a singular event of origin for cultural phenomena, but because it was the Bible that was understood to document Christianity, the notion of origins was very difficult to dismiss.

And the times were right to generate the absolutely amazing scholarly investment in the social-historical study of the Bible characteristic of the German traditions. Unfortunately, the Bible was not actually there at the beginning, and the Christianity Christians had in mind did not appear until sometime after Constantine. But neither of these glitches was apparent at the time of the Reformation or during the flourishing of biblical studies in the two centuries afterward. And so the Bible was located in the Hellenistic period among a wide range of Greco-Roman texts and Jewish histories that were coming into view. It was a heady and exciting time for scholars of the Renaissance.

At first it was Paul's *kerygma* that seemed to focus upon the dramatic event that must have started everything. Then it was the gospel stories of Jesus and his teachings that anchored Jesus and the *kerygma* in the histories of the times to add their sensational logics. Then there was Luke's "first church" in Jerusalem to place the believers in their congregations and watch the apostolic missions unroll. Eventually there was much more to pore over: *chreiai*, associations, disciples and apostles, meals, letters, the narrative gospels, Q, and Thomas, to say nothing of the huge accumulation of comparative literature from and about the other religions ("Oriental" as they were called), such as the "mystery cults" (thought to have had a "dying and rising god"), the *Mithrasliturgie* (thought to have offered a ritual union of the human with the divine by means of a "*Seelen Reise*"), pagan poems such as the *Oraculis Chaldaicis* and the Orphic Hymns, Gnosticism, and the Hellenistic Jewish writings. All were available for comparison as the "backgrounds" for Christianity while searching for the original "kernel" event in the NT that must have generated Christianity's unique and incomparable appearance. The troubling issue of Jew and Gentile was given much attention because of Paul's interest in the issue and because of the standard views about Judaism as the precursor for Christianity. But luckily, because the Bible contained both the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christian writings, and because Justin Martyr in the second century had established that the Hebrew Scriptures were an allegory of the gospels in advance, the *logos* kernel of the Christian gospels was not called into question. And from the Greek side of the cultural mix, the noble death of a Socratic martyrdom could be called upon to buttress the logic of the passion narrative much better than the Maccabean

martyrologies, even though the early Christians had only a mythic kingdom to die for instead of a Greek city-state or a Hebrew temple state. Recently it has even been proposed in a monograph that the resurrection and ascension were historical events as documented in the appearances and visions of the risen Lord. So there has been over 300 years of scholarship to document the origins of Christianity on the basis of its dramatic breakthrough into "history" as "documented" in the Bible. And this means that we became NT scholars because of a Protestant mistake and a cultural ruse.

I had been asking questions since high school about how Christians could possibly believe in the Christian myth, and by the time I had worn out my teachers in high school and college, I landed at San Francisco Theological Seminary because it was there, they said, that the Bible would answer my questions. The seminary experience was my personal enlightenment, to be sure, what with learning Greek, Hebrew, some Syriac, a bit of Aramaic, and my first serious review of the history of Western civilization (it was actually "church history"). But my questions about how so many Christians could believe in the Bible were still not to be answered even at a Presbyterian seminary. Ted Gill, James Robinson, Arnold Come, and others said I should go on to Germany where Conzelmann was dealing with the question of myth and history.

I arrived at the University of Göttingen in 1963 to study with Hans Conzelmann. By then the Germans had learned about myth and the history of religions. Bultmann said that modern-day Christians were not able to believe in myth, even and especially the Christian myth. Thus it had to be *demythologized*. An extremely rich period of discourse had developed. There was Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Sartre, and the list of books on "Jesus Christ and Mythology," "Kerygma and Myth," and "Christ Without Myth." Conzelmann was a student of Bultmann but more interested in the ways Ancient Near Eastern myths became intellectual traditions that influenced early Christianity. His essay on Sirach 24, in which he established some links between Sophia, Chokma, Isis, and Maat, caught my attention because it brought several cultures together as if their mythologies were modes of social thought. My assignment was to see if the *logos* in Philo and the first chapter of John's gospel also followed a mythic grammar indebted to the mythology of Sophia-Chokma. The notion that seeking for Sophia-Chokma, a mythological figure that had taken flight because of a rejection in society but who said she would return and/or could be found if pursued, was being discussed in Göttingen, along with the Ancient Near Eastern "Anthropos Myth." My assignment was to track the wisdom myth and the anthropos myth down and see if the Prologue to John was indebted to them. I spent two years researching the literatures of the Ancient Near East looking for traces of these myths. Then Carsten Colpe found that the anthropos myth was a scholarly fiction; there was no such thing in antiquity. And I, finally, told Conzelmann that the wisdom myth was hardly to be found in the Ancient Near Eastern literature, but that he had been right about the mythology of Maat as a

model for the figure of wisdom in Sirach 24, also for the wisdom poetry in the Wisdom of Solomon, and that Philo knew about this configuration but clearly preferred the figure of the *Logos* to that of *Sophia* for explaining the wisdom of the written books of Moses. Conzelman said, "Good," that it was enough, and that I should write it up. Well, they gave me a degree for it, but I never did get back to the Gospel of John.

So there I was back in the United States at the University of New Jersey assigned to teach courses in the NT when all I knew was the literatures of Greece and the Ancient Near East as the "background" to the NT. It was toward the end of the sixties when students wanted to know what had gone wrong with Western civilization, the Christian tradition, and why our nation-state thought it could spread democracy by dropping bombs on Vietnam. All I could do in New Jersey was introduce English majors to the literatures of Christian origins as I had learned to read them. The students thought it was interesting, of course, that they could read these texts "in social-historical context" as they said, without having to deal with the Christian "belief system" as they called it. But of course, neither of us could say why Christians thought the NT and Christian Origins was so important, why I had to spend so much time studying it, why a college needed to offer a course in it, or what difference that knowledge made for the way the world was working in the present.

Then some NT scholars who found my work on wisdom and Philo interesting asked for a lecture or two. There was the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the Jesus Seminar, The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, and eventually the Seminar devoted to "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins." I think it was Merrill Miller and Ron Cameron who came up with this title. When they asked the Executive Board at SBL to form a seminar, the Board responded that the title should be "Ancient Theories and Modern Myths of Christian Origins." But Miller laughed and said to leave it as it was. By then I had written the *Myth of Innocence* book because Funk said I could not have NT credentials on the basis of writing only about OT texts and authors. When Cameron, Miller, and Jonathan Z. Smith read the Mark book, they gathered around, looked me in the eye, and asked about my social theory of religion. They said I had written the Gospel of Mark book to explain its mythology, but without referring to its Christian meaning or theology. How did I do that? Did I have a social theory of religion related to what they saw as my rationalism supported by a merely descriptive method and style? When I said that I did not know what my social theory was, they told me we would have to form a seminar on the Mark book to find out. Well now, we did have a marvelous go at it. They said that my description of Mark's text sounded like Jonathan's method of redescription, and he might help us with his theory of myth and ritual. Oh my. We had to struggle with a redescription of the several groups that produced the early myths, all of which NT scholars (and I at that time) had called "congregations" or "communities." Now there were instead the Q people, the Thomas

people, the Hellenic schools of philosophy, Mark's stories of the disciples debating the Pharisees in the synagogue, Paul's *ekklesiai* (for which there was a translation familiar to Christians), and so forth. It was tough going, however, and we were not able to find the attraction for any of these social formations that called for the myths they came up with, and none that fit with the eventual pictures of Christian congregations that all of us still must have had in mind. We did tussle a bit with the question of myth theory, reading some of Jonathan Smith, Levi-Strauss, and especially Marshall Sahlins, where he coined the term "conjuncture of cultures" to explain the shifts in British and Hawaiian ideologies during the Captain Cook encounters. But our papers stayed pretty much at the level of social-historical description without getting the link between "mythmaking" and "social formation" clarified by a mechanism.

And because the historical data were murky and the categories for social formation and mythmaking were all still beholden to the Western intellectual tradition, our studies did not work well to identify and explain "early" (actually "pre") Christian social formations. That meant that the subliminal mentality embedded in the scholarly tradition of biblical studies was still at work among us, providing the questions and the categories for the redescriptions we were trying to imagine. We were somewhat aware of this problem of course, but thought that we could tackle it by charting the processes by which the various components of the Christian myth and practices had occurred, and then assessing the reasons for the components one by one. In some ways we did do that, but we did not come upon any particular event or set of reasons that could explain the "origins" of Christianity. Instead, what we found were scattered teachings, schools of thought, groupings into associations, and bios of intellectuals and teachers working with ideas about the kingdom of God in the interest, apparently, of finding some orientation to the Hellenistic age in a period of national and cultural breakdown and conflict. We could not fully explain the attraction of these teachings, schools, gatherings, and the Jesus myths that dotted the Greco-Roman world canvas in ways that could account for the eventual emergence of the Christianity we had in mind. We did see that certain features of significance for the traditional societies and cultures that were swirling around in the Greco-Roman world, features that belonged to the social theory of religion we were working on, were not available for the Jesus people. The early followers of Jesus had no homeland traditions of their own to anchor them in history, no common myth or ritual, and no cultural symbols. All they had, as far as we could tell, were some teachings about how to live in the midst of a troubled world and about another kind of kingdom, one they imagined might be possible were *theos* the king. This may have been a heady idea for the times, and it became a kind of metaphysical philosophy as some of these Jesus groups worked over his teachings. Some groups must have discussed these teachings on the model of the Greek schools of philosophy and formed networks of small groups on the model of what the Greeks called "associations." The intellectuals

of these school traditions, many of whom were Jewish scholars troubled by the tragedies and uncertainties toward the end of the history and epic of Israel, seemed to be working on the problem of how the Jesus teachings and schools could be understood to belong to Israel as a kind of sequel to the Hebrew epic. They were not at all clear about that question or its answer. They were, however, producing a huge literature in some attempt to fit their kingdom philosophy into the bigger picture of the Hebrew epic and the Greek cosmos in order to locate the Jesus schools and *christos* groups within the lands and powers of the Roman empire. Meanwhile, the local leaders of these associations found themselves taking care of the practical needs of their people, perhaps on the Hebrew model of care for the "widows and orphans," thus providing a kind of social service to peoples whose erstwhile kings and officials were no longer in power.

Eventually Constantine took note early in the fourth century, and because the Romans were running out of energy, ideas, and the control of the many peoples in their empire, Constantine apparently thought the networks of Jesus schools and Christ associations (the term *christos* having become a common name for the founder figure) might help as a kind of social glue. He was an unlikely candidate for the office of emperor, with its senatorial notions of aristocratic dynasty, but succeeded nevertheless to that office as a military man. Another odd feature of his credentials was that he understood himself to be a Christian even though tutored in the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia, the Eastern emperor who unleashed the last of the persecutions of Christians in the early fourth century. Historians have not been able to explain how it was that Constantine had become a Christian or survived as a Christian in the court of Diocletian. But it does appear that there was some influence from other prominent Christians, including perhaps Constantine's mother, who by now may have been in evidence at the Eastern court. It is also the case that during this period of confusion about the empire there were many would-be-emperors in the wings, several serving as generals in the armies throughout the erstwhile spread of the empire, and all of them devoted to this or that deity or hero as their protector.

In any case, once Constantine was secure in his position as the next Roman emperor, he announced devotion to Christ at the Milvian bridge and asked the leaders of several clusters of the Christian groups to accept Roman tutelage. Historians have sometimes thought it strange that Constantine could use the religion of a dislocated non-Roman people who sought to imagine god's kingdom on universal terms (one kind of big picture) in order to claim divine authority for the Roman empire (another kind of big picture). But that is what he did. He installed the Christians as the official cult (or religion) of the empire to be in charge of piety, welfare, and the instruction of the people. He convened councils of the leading Christian bishops to decide finally upon the dates for their major rituals and festivals as a respectable calendar required. He encouraged Eusebius and others to come to some agreement upon the selection of their scriptures, and to work out a common statement of what Christians believed to distin-

guish Christians from both their Jewish and Greek predecessor cultures. And Constantine asked the bishops to supervise the designs and locations for the basilicas he planned to build for them as temples for the honor of the emperor worship and the worship of their god. What an historic event, the installation by decree of a mythology, book, and epic worldview—and the creation of a myth-ritual institution for an autocratic empire. It must have been in the course of these many transformations of myth and social formation that the symbolic ritual of the death of Jesus as a martyrdom was worked out for the basilicas. Constantine must have been impressed with this arrangement as a whole, for the Christian scriptures, now to consist of the Hebrew Scriptures as the OT and the early Christian writings as the NT, allowed the *Roman empire* (soon to be a mythic concept able to survive the dismantling of the empire itself) to see itself in continuity with the epic of Israel, chosen by the supreme god of creation and the cosmos to rule in his name as the supreme authority and power for civilizing the world of pagans. Christendom had begun.

Constantine's vision changed the course of Western history, but it did not work as the solution to the unification of the Roman empire. Rome remained a "pagan city" soon to be set upon by Zenobia of Palmyra (third century), the Visigoths (Aleric, 408), Attila the Hun (410), the Vandals, Franks, and others during the sixth century, up until the Norman sack of Rome in 1084, which was still seen as a dismantling of the "empire." Then there was the conflict with Constantinople as the "capital" of Eastern power and the confused histories of the many wars and conflicts among the kings of various peoples throughout the Eastern, European, and Mediterranean lands for the next long chapter of what we have learned to call Western Civilization. Nevertheless, the combination of royal power and religious institution, a version of the ancient Near Eastern temple-state pattern, gave the church its curious role as the divine authority for Christendom and the later kings. This institutional form of religion was a winner for the long period of Western civilization. For about 1500 years no monarch among the European nations thought of ruling other than a Christian kingdom.

This means that Constantine and the *Roman* empire were not the winners. It was *Christianity* and its empire that won. It was the big picture of Christendom that eventually provided the mythic world and mentality for all of the subsequent kings, kingdoms, and peoples. The mythic picture was all encompassing. It filled the vast expanse of cosmos and history with the stories from the Bible until there was no room left for other histories or peoples. The Christian god ruled the universe as a solitary sovereign from creation to a "final judgment" (eschaton). The world of this biblical epic stayed in mind as people designed the shape of their cathedrals, palaces, and cities on earth. The monuments are obvious and familiar. The cathedrals at Chartres and the Notre-Dame in Paris are excellent examples. The Christian world of cosmos and history was etched in the stones of the portals, columns, and the arches high above. The apse was packed with images of the father-god above in the clouds of heaven, his son

ascending into heaven, and the figures of the pious from the history of Israel, the disciples from the gospel stories, and the saints and kings of the subsequent histories. Later, the so-called "passion narrative" could be depicted on the sanctuary walls as the "stations of the cross" on the way to the altar where the red candle light marked the presence of the divine spirit, and the ascending son of god was replaced with a crucifix. The cathedral was designed as a micro-cosmos and the ritual Mass within took place in otherworldly time. It was eternal theatre. All art, philosophy, piety, vestments, and discourse from this long period of Western history reveal a sensibility for the divine drama of heaven and earth that Western civilization has taken for granted.

One might think that the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century should have tempered the attraction of the medieval cosmic picture for Christians, so clearly etched on the portals of the Cathedral of Notre Dame and elsewhere, and in some respects it did. But the matters calling for reformation were hardly matters of distress about the worldview. They were matters of consternation about the Catholic confessional, ritual, and practice of selling indulgences. In view of the dawning Enlightenment and the Age of Discovery, the conflicts among the petty kings of Europe called for an awareness of the social interests of the several ethnic traditions that surfaced in Europe now that their encompassment by the Holy Roman Empire was dissolving. The emerging interest in the texts and histories of antiquity, a result of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, determined that the pieties of penance were no longer convincing, much less sufficient for understanding the function of the church for the believer. However, the medieval notion of "kingdom" was not dropped when the protest against the confessional gathered strength. It played a major role in the ideological separation of the two forms of Christendom. Martin Luther actually extracted the notion of the kingdom from Catholic Christendom and applied it to the role of the Protestant churches in their various European kingdoms by saying that the Protestant church continued to represent a "kingdom," but that the Christian view of the Church in the world was now a matter of having two kingdoms. He coined the phrase "two kingdoms" (in his *zwei Reiche Lehre*), which turned civil society into an order that was not at all devoid of Christian interests and mores even though thoroughly "secularized." This implicitly claimed a civic authority for the Protestant churches without calling the cosmic myth into question. The cosmic myth was simply left in place while the substitution of the biblical form of the myth for the Catholic ritual focused exegetical attention on the Bible and the early history of Christendom. The study of the Bible would be the way Protestants understood and confirmed their "faith" as a matter of intellectual commitment to a biblical theology. This transformed the liturgy of the Mass into a "service of worship" in which the Bible and preaching were central. As the famous cliché from Luther says, "where the sacraments are held and the Word is preached, there is the Church."

However, the Bible was no longer limited to its function as a ritual script for the Mass that celebrated the eternal presence. It was now the document of human history from creation to eschaton with a pivot at Christian origins. That means that the curious combination of myth as history in the gospels affected the reading of the entire Bible as a text of sacred history. Thus the narrative drama was no longer a matter solely of mythic events in the transcendent world of the cosmos. It became a double quest romance with two agents in an irresolvable tryst. The divine agent should be able to have his way, for he is the all-powerful creator of the world. But his need to be recognized, adored, and obeyed as the Father of his children and as the sole sovereign of the universe keeps running into trouble, for humans find themselves distracted by one another in their own quests for advantage and power. These human "questings" are regarded by the divine monarch as evidence of intransigence, and he responds with threats and promises. The threat is of punishment and final destruction. The promise is of forgiveness if his children repent or adoption if the ungodly convert. Viewed by Protestant Christians as the divine plan for human history from beginning to end, there is no other history that counts.

When we realize the scope of Christendom's big picture of the world, its total comprehension of the cosmic and worldly spheres, we can begin to understand its social and cultural effect as a pervasive mentality and sensibility that has persisted in Western traditions for almost 1600 years. It has absorbed untold intellectual inventions, social projects, and political philosophies without ever having to be acknowledged or dislodged. That has been its genius as the ultimate encompassment of the human imagination. As the cosmic scope of the mentality produced by the Christian myth, its unapproachable limits determine that its narrative grammar is not easily dislodged. There was the Renaissance that produced the psychology of the individual and that now can easily be seen as the result of a mythic and intellectualist invention that worked away from the traditional anthropology of Christendom. However, from Petrarch through Montaigne, to the Protestants and Postmodernists, the stunning discovery of the person as an individual has not erased a sensibility for some transcendent order of reality and a fundamental conviction that some kind of divinity or agency must exist beyond the limits of our human experience. The Enlightenment introduced intellectuals to texts outside the Bible and invented the concepts of history and criticism to understand them. There was Science and the astronomical world it discovered that did not agree with that of the Christian cosmos, but allowed the mythic world to continue. There was the Age of Discoveries that reshaped the world and its peoples in ways that no longer agreed with the biblical accounts of geography and lineage, but worked out ways to convert and instruct the natives without calling into question the mythic world of the Christian cosmos.

But then there was the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Capitalism that is now the driving force in our modern world of industry and finance, the force

that has created both the attraction and the ugliness of the picture of America in the world today. Neither industry nor our global financial institutions have needed Christianity or its god to tell them what to do or how to behave. They have been busy creating their own myths and a new social psychology of confidence in the human enterprise of capitalistic socialization without any appeal to divine authority or the model of Christendom. The social interests that have evolved have little to do with the medieval interests of Christendom or the biblical ethos of Protestantism. The social psychology of our global system of industry and finance is independent of the state and the institutions of religion. It supports private interests, not social, corporate, or national interests, and runs on the motivations required for competition, gaming, profit, growth, accumulation, wealth, and incorporation. One might wonder how the Bible has managed to keep its mythic world alive.

Focusing now on the Bible, there is a social logic to the narrative grammar of the Bible that is troubling. The logic determines the way in which Christians learn to think about others and, in fact, everything else in their worlds. The social logic of the biblical narrative determines the Christian's judgments about the right way to classify and define things. It begins with a logic of the singular, which says that there is only one god, one law, one credo, one system of values, and one right way to live and please the sovereign. In the Catholic tradition all of that was taken care of in the institutions and rituals of Christendom. But in Protestantism, this logic frustrates the individual Christian's quest to be sure of one's "election," to know for sure the right way to live in the world and what to think about political loyalties. It is also the logic behind what we can now call Christian mentality, the cultural preference for thinking that there is only one correct definition for an object and that the really important events and decisions are, as we say, "unique," that is, singular and incomparable. The trouble with this logic of the singular is that it cannot handle the real world. And it is compounded by a mythic logic of the dual.

The logic of the dual starts with the divine demand for obedience, which recognizes the fact that humans can disobey. The logic of the dual then continues with the distinction between the human and the divine, the cultural division of the human race into Christians and all the others, and finally with the oppositions of "right vs. wrong," "good vs. bad," and "us vs. them." This has made it extremely difficult for Christians to accept and appreciate difference, compromise with other points of view, and to negotiate with non-Christians and other cultures. Scholars have tried to trace aspects of this cultural mind-set to the Greek philosophies of "being" (versus "becoming"), and the Aristotelian theory of language whereby a single definitional term or name for a thing must be found before "knowledge" of the thing itself can occur. This has been worked out in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. However, Heidegger's analysis of this philosophic tradition in *Sein und Zeit* makes it clear that the Greek culture alone cannot account for the absolutism of the singular in the Western tradi-

tion of philosophy. It is true that the fixation on the “singular” definition of an object is a cultivation of the “mono” mindset of the world of “Being” that has been pursued by Westerner philosophers. But this Western tradition of philosophy is a combination of Greek and Christian concepts and worldviews, and the Christian myth also works with a mono logic. Thus cultural critics in our time, such as David Harvey, William Samos, and Fredric Jameson, have been referring to the *Logos* and logic of the Western tradition that has continued in modern and contemporary cultural manifestations including Postmodernism. It is important to see that the Western traditions of philosophy and theology (not always seen as forms of the same pursuit) have been grounded in the Christian worldview and the social logic of its myth. This means that a subliminal Christian mentality at the core of the Western cultural tradition is the form of Christianity that underlies the ways in which the people of the United States think about themselves and the world.

And yet, it was something of a surprise when the troubling concept of the “Christian Nation” popped up in American political discourse. At the people level the notion was more or less accepted as a statement about the nation we had always been. But everyone knew that the term “Christian” referred to individuals and churches, not to the society. Then it became known that a pseudo-intellectual cabal of the Bush administration was behind this talk, including Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Rove, Cheney, and others, who had created some white papers on “The American Century” to come, incorporating the notions of “manifest destiny,” the spread of the American way, executive authority, financial power, and global military control, all justified by the concept of the Christian nation as leader of the nations of the world. And the President, George W. Bush, cited the Prologue to the Gospel of John to describe America’s role as a light to the nations, a “light shining in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” These conservative Christian politicians were obviously beholden to the expansive mythology of Christendom, now applied to the righteous nation and its global military destiny of control over the world. Carl Schmitt’s political philosophy had taken root in America¹ along with Jeff Sharlet’s insight about the Christian fundamentalism erupting at the peak of power, destined to cover the entire world.² I was stunned. The “Christian Nation” talk was grounded in the Christian myth of the Western tradition, but no longer needed the authorization of the Christian church. It actually violated the American rubric of the separation of Church and State and substituted “national and economic interests” as the reasons for its “missions” abroad instead of the traditional reasons for the Christian mission, namely, the conversion of others to the Christian religion. The goal of the so-called “American Century” was actually the “American

1. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

2. See Jeff Sharlet, *The Family*.

Empire" of global economic and military control. The "gospel" was now the "spread of democracy" and "nation-building." So there was little left of what Christians had understood as Christianity except the archaic fascination with sovereignty, power, and authority that was now being transferred from the deity in his cosmic realm to the hands of the conservative politicians and financial institutions of the American Nation-State.

"American Empire," "Christian Nation," "Manifest Destiny"—what a curious legacy of Constantine's Christendom, what a strange configuration of Luther's *zwei Reiche Lehre*, what an odd authorization for the global mission of a modern nation-state, and what a grotesque conundrum for biblical scholars in pursuit of the origins of Christianity. It is that conundrum that should refocus our project. The scholarly pursuit of Christian Origins has not told us what to think about Christian origins then, the eventual formation of Christendom, or about Christianity and the current state of the world now. It has produced an amazing accumulation of textual and historical knowledge about the first couple of centuries, both sides of the "historical Jesus" to be sure. And this knowledge is precious as the accomplishment of an intellectual and scholarly discipline within the Western academy. The function of biblical scholarship within the institutions of religion as a constant questing for theologies and the refinements of symbolic rationales has inculcated and supported the systems of belief and the polities of churches and denominations. But its relevance for the churches as the social institutions of religion in the modern world has become quite thin. It is now to be seen as a remarkable production of an academic discipline that used a mythic text as an historical document. And now that the modern world has created a conundrum for this project, some of us are wondering what to do with its learning and knowledge.

We could begin by recognizing the Protestant mistake of taking the ritual text of Christianity as an historical document for Christian origins. Then we might want to recognize the curious formation of the Bible as the epic mythology for the Western tradition of civilization. And then we might notice the social logic of this epic mythology and its narrative grammar as the mentality of Western culture. Since we are those who study this text and know all about its formations and applications, should we not be the expert professionals in the analysis of its role in current social and cultural issues? In some ways we are, but mainly as the providers for occasional footnotes for journalists, historians, and publishers outside the field of biblical studies. As members of the SBL, however, we have been having a difficult time letting the world outside the guild know what to think about the Bible as the cultural myth underlying Western mentality.

Natalie Houghtby-Haddon, a biblical scholar at George Washington University, decided to attend a Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration of *The Washington Times*, a conservative voice in opposition to *The Washington Post*. She sneaked in as a liberal to listen to the speeches on their theme of "Renewing our Common Legacy: Interfaith Unity for Family, Faith,

Freedom, and Service." Donald Rumsfeld was the Keynote speaker, and others included Cal Thomas, David Limbaugh, and Jennifer Spano from Fox News. The clear message was that Christianity is what made America strong, and the loss of Christianity to the liberals and secularists will be the downfall of the nation. For Natalie, a memorable moment was when Jennifer Spano said, "They're trying to take our Genesis away from us." In her report on the conference, Natalie gave a brief review of what scholars and liberals had said about Genesis that did not agree with the popular reading and the way conservative values were thought to be anchored in the Bible. Natalie found the conference troubling, not only because of the shrill and strident rhetoric against political progressives, but because of the harsh statements about those who did not "believe in" the Bible and did not honor conservative Christian values.

This means that the Bible is out there in the society under a debate of some kind by those concerned with cultural and ethical values. If this debate is left at the level of who gets to own the Bible, however, the arguments will all be ugly expressions of winning and losing in the "snatch and grab it" competition for controlling a commodity. There is little to say to Spano at this point that could answer her charge of the liberals taking "our Genesis" away. Neither the conservatives, nor the liberals, nor biblical scholars are able to calm things down, because they do not know how to talk about the Bible dislodged from its place in the world of the church. They do not think of the Bible as the culture's myth. They do not know why it is society that is now in trouble, and not the myth that no longer applies. But social issues are now under discussion, and the Bible is there, curiously conflicted by a combination of its inordinate authority as the scripture for Christianity on the one hand, and the growing irrelevance of Christianity on the other.

What needs to happen is for biblical scholars to recognize the Bible as the myth that underlies Western culture, the culture that is now in trouble. Biblical scholars should be able to do that by making two inversions of method. Instead of asking about the formation of the Bible at its beginnings, scholars might start asking about its applications from Christendom to the present. This would be one inversion: from then to now. And the second would be to relocate the Bible from its place inside the Church's world to the arena outside the Church in the social world. A change from inside to outside would affect the hermeneutical sensibilities. Instead of allowing the traditional theological aura to continue to have its play, the questions would be about the actual effectiveness of the biblical myth as a cultural grammar in relation to social situations. By describing the Bible's epic mythology as a social logic and analyzing its narrative as a social psychology, it should be possible to say something about the social issues under discussion in general public discourse and introduce some considerations of the possible role that the biblical myth might be making. This would not have to be a defense of the Bible or its logic but an exploration of the cultural mentality at work in the society. We are those who know the narrative and social logics of

the biblical mythology. Just to describe its possible application to a particular social issue in current debate and explain the logics involved would amount to an extraordinary contribution in cultural critique.

Discourse at the public level is, of course, quite different from talking to ourselves inside the boundaries of an academic club. But since the biblical guild is in the process of losing its traditional audiences in the churches and academies, anyway, its attempts at finding a responsible and reasonable role for its investments and labor is not much different from many other social academic disciplines that now find themselves at the limits of their orders wondering what to do next. So why not put our learning out there in the intellectual marketplace where social unrest and cultural criticism are now providing the topics for public discourse? We might have to learn a few new rhetorical ruses to get the attention of intellectuals in other fields. Most of them have not dared to analyze and criticize the social logics of religions. And our culture critics have not had the learning and expertise to do what biblical scholars are prepared to do, put the Bible as the Christian myth into the social and cultural situations to be analyzed. So the field of play is open for some questions about the Christian mythic logic that underlies American cultural mentality. It might be a very interesting academic and public conversation!

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The Labors of Burton Mack

Scholarship That's Made a Difference

Ron Cameron

I wish to sing a song of praise
as a crown to his labors.

—Euripides, *Heracles* 355–56

Observe that I have not labored for myself alone,
but for all who seek *paideia*.

—Sirach 24:34; 33:18

“To be born woman is to know —
Although they do not talk of it at school —
That we must labour to be beautiful.”

I said, “It’s certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam’s fall but needs much labouring.”

—W. B. Yeats, “Adam’s Curse”

I

Burton L. Mack introduces his magisterial *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* with a clarion call and a challenge to make sense—social sense—of the beginnings of the Christian religion:

Since Foucault published his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, New Testament scholars have thought of their work as digging. . . . The image is attractive in some respects and disconcerting in others. An aura of archeology is gratifying mainly because it seems to bless the labor as worthwhile. . . . It is disconcerting nonetheless to see what happens when the metaphor is pressed too far. One catches sight of a very messy dig and of diggers in disagreement about what they are looking for. Not only is there confusion about what counts as an artifact, there is no clarity about what a firm foundation might be were one ever to be found. . . . What if one acknowledged that the gospel story was Christianity’s charter document and regarded its formation as an essential moment in the “laying of the foundations”? . . . If the social circumstances of that later time were regarded as the “foundational” stratum, and the composition of the gospel taken as the “originary” moment of significance for Christian origins, the fantastic events depicted in the gospel might actually begin to make sense. . . . Supposing that the gospels were myths of origin for social formations in need of a charter, the scholar’s quest would have to be to understand the mo-

ment when the gospel was designed. Foucault's archeology refers, after all, not to a quest for extraordinary events of generation prior to social formation, but to critical moments of social interest within a given discourse.¹

Four features of Mack's argument are intimated here: (1) a critique of the discipline of NT scholarship, with its quest for a singular genesis of Christianity; (2) a proposal for a shift in perspective on the social history and imaginative labor documented by the texts; (3) a call for the need for a serious engagement with critical theory; and, (4) a recognition of authorial creativity in Mark's composing his myth of origins, the first Christian narrative gospel.

Mack's critique of biblical scholarship, with its quest for Christian origins, is particularly trenchant and worth the price of the book:

Some event, it is thought, or moment, or impulse, needs to be discovered as the source for the novelty Christianity introduced into the world. . . . The fundamental persuasion is that Christianity appeared unexpectedly in human history, that it was (is) at core a brand new vision of human existence, and that, since this is so, only a startling moment could account for its emergence. The code word serving as sign for the novelty that appeared is the term unique (meaning singular, incomparable, without analogue). For the originary event the word is transformation (rupture, breakthrough, inversion, reversal, eschatological). For the cognitive effect of this moment the language of paradox is preferred (irony, parable, enigma, the irrational). It is this startling moment that seems to have mesmerized the discipline and determined the applications of its critical methods. All of the enormous labor devoted to the preparation of texts, the honing of linguistic instruments, and the devisement of methods has been organized just in order to approach as closely as possible that moment of mystery even if, in the last analysis, some leap of the imagination will be required to posit its presence. Where to locate the mystery has been the unacknowledged question guiding the twists and turns of the scholarship. . . . What if the notion of a single, miraculous point of origin was acknowledged for what it was, not a category of critical scholarship at all, but an article of faith derived from Christian mythology? Then the quest would have to be turned around. Not the mythic events at the beginning, but the social and intellectual occasions of their being imagined would be the thing to understand.²

This critique is concerned chiefly with the notion of "uniqueness," conceived in terms of "origins."³ But since "New Testament scholarship can be described as an archeology of early traditions about Jesus and the Christ," Mack's criticism

1. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, xi, xii; cf. 23–24, citing Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

2. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 3, 4, 8.

3. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 368. See Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36–46.

is leveled at the quest of the historical Jesus⁴ and the quest for the earliest christology,⁵ the “two main tracks along which the quest for Christian origins has traveled.”⁶

Mack’s proposal for a “single shift in perspective on texts” to be taken up for analysis in his book places special emphasis on the way in which “texts will be read in relation to their social settings,” in particular, on “social experience as the occasion for imaginative activity and literary production”:⁷

The shift in perspective is required as soon as it is realized that the creative replication of the memory of Jesus took place in the interest of articulating not only how it was at the beginning, but how it was or should be at the several junctures of social history through which a memory tradition traveled. . . . What if the social circumstances were regarded as the generative matrix for a recasting of the memory tradition? What if novelties that enter the memory tradition were to be viewed as creating as well as interpreting the imagined origins of the move-

4. For a pointed critique of the quest of the historical Jesus, see the subsequent argument of Mack, who observes that “the quest has not produced any agreement about a textual data base from which to work. The textual units used for this or that profile change from scholar to scholar without any agreed-upon theoretical framework to adjudicate the differences among them. This is a serious indictment of the guild of New Testament scholarship . . . [which] resists the pursuit of a theoretical framework and the accompanying rules of argumentation necessary for coming to agreements about matters of data, method, explanation, and replication of experiments or research projects. These are foundational matters for an academic discipline. . . . If there is no agreement about what texts count and how to turn them into data for historical reconstructions, it means that the quest [of the historical Jesus] cannot be thought of as an academic discourse within a scholarly discipline. . . . This means that we need to start over with the quest for Christian origins. And the place to start is with the observation that the New Testament texts are not only inadequate for a Jesus quest, they are data for an entirely different phenomenon. They are . . . the myths of origin imagined by early Christians seriously engaged in their social experiments. They are data for early Christian mythmaking” (Mack, “The Historical Jesus Hoopla,” 34, 35, 40).

5. For a critique of the “Christ event,” a theological term that encodes the death and resurrection of Jesus, see Mack, who observes that “all scholars seem to agree . . . on the importance of the resurrection. Three terms are frequently used, each encoded by custom within the discourse of the discipline, to refer euphemistically to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: Easter, appearance, and spirit. . . . These coded signs, usually capitalized, do not enlighten because they mark the point beyond which the scholar chooses not to proceed with investigation, indeed, the point beyond which reasoned argument must cease. They serve as ciphers to hold the space for the unimaginable miracle that must have happened prior to any and all interpretation. They have become an all too convenient rhetorical device for evoking the myth of Christian origins without [ever] having to explain it. . . . Appeal to ‘the resurrection’ is the most mystifying of all the ciphers used to protect the myth of Christian origins from critical investigation. The notion is used regularly . . . as if the resurrection were a datable piece of evidence. By allowing the mystery of Easter and the [resurrection] appearances to mark the point from which the Spirit effected the new age of Christian experience and mission, everything else can be examined rigorously without threatening the notion of originary uniqueness. . . . A point of origin has been established that is fundamentally inaccessible to further probing or clarification. It guarantees the uniqueness of early Christianity by locating its novelty beyond data and debate” (Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 7, 7–8 n. 3).

6. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 5; cf. 6 n. 2.

7. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 15.

ments? What if the really interesting question were given its due, why and how his early followers came to create the aura of divine originality for Jesus in the first place? What if the several diverse pictures of Jesus contained in the New Testament were less hermeneutical with regard to the historical Jesus and more the creation of myths of origin for movements in need of rationalization?⁸

Mack's book is thus "an investigation of the relation between imaginative composition and social experience in early Christian circles"; his goal is to bring "social histories together with what is known of textual traditions and seek to understand each in the light of the other."⁹

Mack's efforts "to redescribe" the "entangled textual and social histories of importance for the composition of the Gospel of Mark," in terms of mythmaking, social formation, and intertextuality,¹⁰ call for an engagement with critical theory, with rhetorical criticism, cultural anthropology, and religious studies:

The attempt will be made at every turn to position a text or a set of texts at some intersection of social and intellectual history. Viewed as a thoughtful composition at a particular juncture of human experience, a text becomes (temporarily) the center around which many other textual and social moments are organized. . . . To position a text at its approximate intersection of multiple textual and social articulations would be not only to understand it, for meaning is (1) a function of intertextual translation, but to discern its intention, for meaning is (2) a display of interest or desire. Knowing that discourse occurs at a remove from both the accidental nature of human experience and the social structures that order practice, discrepancy between the way things were said to be and the way they actually went must always be kept in mind. In the case of the gospel traditions this factor of incongruity is exaggerated and compounded by the fact that social issues were reflected and addressed not by discourse directly related to the contemporary situations of concern, but by means of repeated reference to

8. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 16, adding: "The picture of Jesus presented by the Gospel of Mark . . . is the product of two generations of vigorous social activity and energetic, imaginative labor."

9. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 19 n. 8, 19. In his efforts "to chart different textual and social histories" of sayings and stories attributed to Jesus, Mack argues that "the place to begin is with the texts where the sayings [and stories] are now located. Literary context does provide a measure of control. . . . If a literature can be placed somewhere within a social history, moreover, a second context of great significance comes into play. . . . Emphasizing [textual] placement at some juncture of social history increases control in the investigation. [For] where sayings reflect upon particular configurations of social situation or concern, one may be close to the [actual] circumstance of composition" (Mack, "The Kingdom Sayings in Mark," 19).

10. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 20; cf. 16–23 with nn. 6–10, 321–24 with nn. 3–4. "Jonathan Z. Smith's constructive theory of religion, more than any other," Mack notes, "informs the position taken in this book" (p. 20 n. 9). For a programmatic application of Smith's method and theory in Mack's book, see *Myth of Innocence*, 19–20 with nn. 8–9, 22–23 n. 10, 27–28 n. 1, 40 n. 10, 50 n. 17, 76 n. 18, 362 n. 4.

Jesus at the beginning. . . . Nevertheless, precisely because something is known about the phenomena of discrepancy and lag at the level of the intellectual labor that supports social construction, it will be possible to identify a variety of discrete intersections where particular texts and specific social configurations kept company for a time. . . . This history can be used, then, to control the investigation of Mark's particular achievement.¹¹

Mack's recognition of authorial creativity in Mark's composition of the gospel means that "the gospel was indeed Mark's creation." Mark wrote "a narrative that brought together two distinctively different types of written material representative of two major types of early sectarian formation":

One stream was that of movements in Palestine and southern Syria that cultivated the memory of Jesus as a founder-teacher. The other was that of congregations in northern Syria, Asia Minor and Greece wherein the death and resurrection of the Christ were regarded as the founding events. Neither of these movements had produced a gospel before Mark, nor would they have done so independently of one another. That is because each had remembered Jesus (Christ) differently, so differently in fact, that Mark's combination of their disparate memory traditions has to be seen as a very daring and experimental moment. Mark stood, apparently, at the intersection of these two streams of social history at a very auspicious and troubling time, drew some conclusions about what to think and do under the circumstances, then made his proposal by writing the story he did. . . . If one wants to understand the origins of the Christian gospel of origins, one must study the way in which Mark fabricated his story, and determine why he wrote it the way he did.¹²

II

A Myth of Innocence is Mack's first substantial publication that has to do with the NT. He had previously written a critique of the scholarly quest for Christian origins, addressed to members of the Jesus Seminar,¹³ an important review and critical assessment of René Girard's reading of the gospels,¹⁴ and an essay on

11. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 21, 22.

12. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 11–12, adding: "The early Jesus movements did not bequeath the social origins of Christianity to the church. They bequeathed their myth of the historical Jesus as the account of a divine origination" (p. 24).

13. Mack, "Gilgamesh and the Wizard of Oz." For subsequent reviews and critiques of the work of scholars who study the Bible and religion, see Mack, review of Habermas and Flew, ed. Miethé, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*; Mack, "All the Extra Jesuses"; Mack, "Staal's Gauntlet and the Queen"; Mack, "Persuasive Pronouncements"; Mack, "Many Movements, Many Myths"; Mack, "Caretakers and Critics"; Mack, "A Secular Bible?"

14. Mack, "The Innocent Transgressor," citing (here, in English translation) Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*; Girard, *The Scapegoat*.

the kingdom-of-God sayings in the Gospel of Mark, which was issued shortly before Mack's book appeared in print.¹⁵ But prior to all of this, Mack's work was concerned principally with wisdom literature and mythology in Hellenistic Judaism,¹⁶ which he explicated in a series of programmatic essays on exegetical and rhetorical traditions in Philo of Alexandria,¹⁷ and elaborated in major studies of authorial composition and epic imagination in Ben Sira and other Jewish wisdom texts.¹⁸

Three theoretical findings contribute to the coherence of these projects and make of them a set. The first is the recognition of the centrality of rhetoric in the discourse and cultural formation of Greco-Roman religious traditions.¹⁹ "Rhetoric," Mack argues, "is to a society and its discourse what grammar is to a culture and its language." The Greeks "took a fancy to the game of public debate, noticed the skill required to participate in public forum, worked out the rules, and called it the art of speaking. . . . They produced handbooks for teaching this technology . . . cultivated occasions for playing the game of repartee, developed a satire capable of bringing critique to rhetorical performance, and created a culture thoroughly at ease with its knowledge that all discourse was rhetorical."²⁰ The second is a theory of "intertextuality," of "the way in which a

15. Mack, "Kingdom Sayings in Mark," who observes that the term "kingdom of God" appears only three times, outside the Jesus tradition, exclusively in sapiential—not apocalyptic—literature (Wis 10:10; cf. 6:17–20; Philo, *Spec. leg.* 4.164; *Sent. Sextus* 311).

16. Mack, "Wisdom Myth and Mythology"; Mack, *Logos und Sophia*; Mack and Murphy, "Wisdom Literature."

17. Mack, "Imitatio Mosis"; Mack, "Exegetical Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism"; Mack, response to Pearson, "Philo and the Gnostics on Man and Salvation"; Mack, "Weisheit und Allegorie bei Philo von Alexandrien"; Mack, "Decoding the Scripture"; Mack, "Philo Judaeus and Exegetical Traditions in Alexandria"; Mack, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Philo"; Mack, "Moses on the Mountain Top"; Mack, "Argumentation in Philo's *De sacrificiis*."

18. Mack, "Under the Shadow of Moses"; Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*; Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference"; Mack, "Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)"; Mack, "The Christ and Jewish Wisdom"; Mack, introduction and annotations to "Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach."

19. See, in addition to the rhetorical analyses of Philo cited in n. 17, Mack and O'Neil, "The Chreia Discussion of Hermogenes of Tarsus"; Mack, "Anecdotes and Arguments"; Mack, "Elaboration of the Chreia in the Hellenistic School."

20. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, 16, adding: "Rhetoric refers to the rules of the language games agreed upon as acceptable within a given society. . . . Interest in such a rhetoric is grounded in the observation that the way we talk to each other is very serious business. Rhetorical theory defines the stakes as nothing less than the negotiation of our lives together. A criticism based upon such a theory of rhetoric might hope to get to the heart of the human matter. . . . Insofar as the development of a theory of rhetoric indicates a society conscious of its culture, an amazing opportunity does present itself to catch Jews, Greeks, and early Christians thinking out loud. The name for this new historiography, an approach to texts with an eye to social histories, is not yet firmly established among scholars. But some are content to call it 'rhetorical criticism.' . . . Rhetorical criticism can place a writing at a juncture of social history and read it as a record of some moment of exchange that may have contributed to the social formations we seek better to understand. Rhetorical criticism may be in fact that most promising form of literary criticism for the task of reconstructing Christian origins with social issues in view" (pp. 16, 17).

given text relates to its contexts as systems of meaning already in place."²¹ Such a notion is worked out in detail in Mack's efforts to chart the "intersection of cultures, Jewish and Hellenic," by means of texts that render the intellectual tradition and mythologies of Jewish wisdom literature as intelligible modes of social thought—exemplified quintessentially by Ben Sira's "mythic reading" of, and "meditation" on, "his own cultural history" and "social system" as an "etiology of Second Temple Judaism."²² The third is Mack's increasing engagement with social and cultural theory, nurtured, especially, through ongoing conversations and a sustained academic tryst with the imaginative discourse and intellectual anthropology of Jonathan Z. Smith.²³

Mack's engagement with Smith's work is first attested in print in the symposium on religion, ritual killing, and cultural formation that he convened as a conversation among Smith, Girard, and Walter Burkert.²⁴ In the context of explicating the arguments of the principals of the debate,²⁵ Mack published under separate cover his critique of Girard's theory of violence and reading of the gospels as "unique," "historically accurate," and "revelatory" texts that take up the age-old plot of "sacrificial crisis" and "collective murder" but cast Jesus as "innocent," not guilty—the "resolution" of the "sacrificial crisis" in "the collective killing of a surrogate victim" that stands, for Girard, as "a mechanism basic for all human social formation and the generator of religion and culture."²⁶ However, in presenting Jesus as a "victim" whose "innocence is such that his death may be taken as a founding event for a new social order as early Christian literature has it," and in "accepting the gospels as accounts which disclose the

21. Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference," 15, adding: "Differences among exemplary texts are highlighted as of significance for understanding any particular configuration." This means that, to understand a text, we need "to see each text as a creative product of the imagination," on the one hand, and "to see that product placed in some context within which its particularity can be assessed," on the other. "There are two con-texts [here] with which scholarly discourse is familiar—the social history that provides the setting for a text's composition and address, and the literary-cultural tradition within which a text takes its place. [The] challenge is to work out an [analytical] approach to texts that can position them at the intersection of these two contexts. . . . The significance of the text itself will be some kind of reflection on the relationship between the two contexts."

22. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, xi, xii–xiii, 6.

23. For a review and assessment of Smith's scholarship, see Smith, "When the Chips are Down"; Smith, "Conjectures on Conjectures," 55–73; Mack, "Introduction: Religion and Ritual," 32–51; Mack, "After *Drudgery Divine*"; Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," 256–59, repr., with revisions, in *The Christian Myth*, 70–74; Mack, "Social Locations"; Mack, "Sacred Persistence?"; Masuzawa, "Reader as Producer"; Cameron, "An Occasion for Thought," 100–104; Cameron and Miller, "Introduction: Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 8–15, 22–25.

24. See, in addition to the studies cited in n. 14, Burkert, *Homo Necans*; Burkert, "The Problem of Ritual Killing"; Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams"; Smith, "Sacred Persistence"; Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual"; Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice"; Girard, "Generative Scapegoating."

25. Mack, "Religion and Ritual."

26. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 145, 142, 137.

reality of the event of Jesus' crucifixion instead of as myths which conceal the social conflict in early Christianity," Girard has given "a reading of the gospels as the church has understood them"—a modern version of "the myth of innocence,"²⁷ read "at the level of the history of ideas," divorced from social-historical context, and indicative, in Mack's terms, of a "Christian mythic mentality."²⁸

Mack's work on religion and rhetoric, intertextuality and critical theory, Hellenistic Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, taken together, supplied the tools and provided the basis of what might be termed Mack's own "preparation for the gospel" of Mark.

A Myth of Innocence is surely one of the most important studies of the origins of Christianity since Schweitzer's *Quest*.²⁹ Brilliant exegetical arguments are made at every turn of detail.³⁰ Here it will have to suffice to mention some major conclusions of significance. First, there's Mack's "characterization of the mytholog[ies] of the various Jesus . . . movements," his "correlation" of "myth[making]" and "processes of social formation," and his "careful reconfiguring of the Gospel of Mark."³¹ The materials Mark used to compose the

27. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 150, 160, 161.

28. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 163, 161, adding: "The gospels are written from the point of view of early Christians. Jesus is portrayed as an innocent victim, but this is false as an historical assertion. It is true only for those who have inverted the valencies from unrighteous to righteous, violence to vicarious gift, in the interest of justifying a social rupture. And those cast as the ones who killed Jesus? They are now the Jews instead of the Romans, thus reflecting the actual rivalries forced by the new social formation. By casting their myth of the vindicated martyr as a history of those events which founded the new social order, early Christians kept their distance from those events and erased the signs of their own responsibility for thinking the daring thoughts which could transform another's violence into their own grace. This erasure is none other than the concealment of the truth about the innocence of the victim which Girard has documented for his persecution texts. So who are the persecutors writing the gospels? They are Christians. And who are the victims? They are the Jews. And what is unique about the Gospels? That the victims are cast as persecutors of an innocent victim. . . . The gospels are documents of Christians seeking justification at the expense of the Jews. . . . Not only is peace between Christians and Jews made impossible by construing the crucifixion mythically as a sacrifice, a sacrifice in which the Jews by definition must be imagined to have performed the deed which determines Christian freedom. Inside the Christian circle as well the mythic mentality which conceals the truth about the arbitrariness of the victimization is compounded now by the claim of one's own innocence of justification. That is salvation at some cost" (pp. 156, 157; cf. 158–59; and see Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 354–55 n. 1, 372, 375).

29. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*; trans. of Von Reimarus zu Wrede.

30. Kelber has called Mack's book "the most penetrating historical work on the origins of Christianity written by an American scholar in this century" (review of *A Myth of Innocence*, 162). Smith has described the work as the "first study of 'Christian origins' which may be taken up, with profit, by the general student of religion" (*Drudgery Divine*, 110 n. 43, emphasis original).

31. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 134, adding: Mack's work "constitutes a radical and thorough-going revision of Christian materials." Note that in his discussion of Mack's book, Smith distinguishes between, and among, these three issues.

gospel—parables,³² pronouncement stories, miracle stories—are studied both as building blocks of the narrative and as “remnants of pre-Markan traditions . . . each with its own particular configuration of Jesus and peculiar social history.”³³ In assessing the patterns of group formation, Mack intends to emphasize not only “the plurality of social formations and their rationales” but also “the relationship between social histories and the myths that emerged about Jesus.”³⁴ For our purposes, four different groups can be reconstructed on the basis of textual traditions distinctive to them:

1. The earliest written record we have from the Jesus schools is preserved in the Sayings Gospel Q.³⁵ Mack suggests that Mark knew some version or variant of Q,³⁶ though Mark preferred, for his own apocalyptic reasons, the announcement of judgment given in the second literary layer of the text to the aphoristic, instructional wisdom that makes up the formative stratum of Q.³⁷
2. The “synagogue reform” movement was largely responsible for the pronouncement stories, or elaborated *chreiai*, that make up a substantial part of the narrative material in the first twelve chapters of Mark and constitute a major source for the composition of the gospel.³⁸ Mack argues, importantly, that Mark himself is to be located within this par-

32. See Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 60–61, 135–71. For additional redescriptions of the parables attributed to Jesus, see Cameron, “Mythmaking and Intertextuality in Early Christianity”; Cameron, “Occasion for Thought.”

33. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 14, adding: “In actuality the situation may have been a bit more fluid, with some overlapping of people, ideas, activities, and the production of texts. . . . But each memory tradition does stem from distinctive social experience and determined intellectual response localized somewhere” (p. 96).

34. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 84. Note that Mack’s “reconstruction of several ‘groups’ mainly by paying attention to a single genre and its characterization of Jesus” was, he now realizes, “too tight, insular, and cell-like” (preface to the 2006 publication of *A Myth of Innocence*, xii).

35. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 57–60, 84–87.

36. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 56, 59, 84, 170–71, 197–98, 204–5, 319–20, 323–24; see Mack, “Q and the Gospel of Mark,” 22–30.

37. As I have argued elsewhere, “Although some try to deny the composite character of the Sayings Gospel, frequently through specious appeals to the hypothetical nature of the reconstructed text, such attempts fundamentally misunderstand how theory works, and thus seek—whether consciously or not—to bypass the results of scholarship and the actual evidence of the gospel texts. For if Q did not exist, we would have to reconstruct it. Theory would demand it. And once the synoptic problem is resolved theoretically by the positing of Q and Q is accorded a documentary status, there is no reason not to examine the text for evidence of possible layers of its literary history. It is necessary to be insistent at this point. We do have a text of Q; what we do not have is a manuscript” (Cameron, “The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” 352). See, in particular, the definitive studies of Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q*; Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q”; Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q*.

38. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 61–62, 94–96, 172–207; cf. 379–84.

- ticular group.³⁹ Not only did this group imagine Jesus as the founder-teacher of a school that “worked out its self-definition in debate with Pharisaic teachings” about ritual purity; it also crafted a number of stories that emphasized Jesus’ authority, and combined such stories with the miracle story tradition to emphasize Jesus’ power in conflict with the Pharisees.⁴⁰ Since the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees “was portrayed as the reason for a plot against Jesus,” and “the plot to kill Jesus was hatched in the synagogue” (cf. Mark 2:1–3:6), the “conflict of the synagogue reform movement with the synagogue was read back into the myth of origins and presented as the cause for Jesus’ crucifixion.”⁴¹
3. The “congregation of Israel” was largely responsible for the early collection of miracle stories that were arranged in two catenae of five stories each.⁴² These two sets, Mack argues, were composed “on the model of epic prototypes” and “replicat[ed] in miniature the story of the Exodus from the crossing of the sea to the formation of the congregation in the wilderness,” presenting Jesus as “the founder and leader of the new movement,” like Moses and Elijah, thereby serving as this group’s “myth of origins.”⁴³
 4. The “congregations of the Christ” were a Jesus movement that had developed into a “Christ cult”⁴⁴ and that “differed from the [other] Jesus movements in two major respects. One was a focus upon the significance of Jesus’ death and destiny. . . . [This] had the result of shifting attention away from the teachings of Jesus,” engendering instead “an elaborate preoccupation with notions of martyrdom, resurrection, and the transformation of Jesus into a divine, spiritual presence. The other major difference was the forming of a cult oriented to that spiritual

39. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 178, 192–93, 197, 199–200, 205, 244, 318–21.

40. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?* 59; see Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 195–99, 204–7, 233–45.

41. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 206, 207. On Mack’s infelicitous use, and subsequent retraction, of the category “synagogue reform movement,” see *Myth of Innocence*, 94–96, 192–207; cf. 101, 107, 125–26, 166, 226–27, 239, 244, 280–81, 316–21, 326–27, 355; Mack, “A Myth of Innocence at Sea,” 147–51; Mack, preface to the 2006 publication of *A Myth of Innocence*, xiii. Note that Mack does not use this term in his description of the Jesus people who produced the pronouncement stories in *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 54–60, 155, 158–60; cf. 314–16. See, most recently, Mack, “Cartwheels,” 138; Mack, “The Spyglass and the Kaleidoscope,” 194.

42. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 91–93, 208–45, following the important source-critical analysis of Achtemeier, “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae.”

43. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 219, 222, 223; cf. 230, adding: “The earliest miracle stories were not reports of the miracle-working activity of Jesus. They were carefully composed sets of stories about Jesus as the founder of the ‘congregation of Israel.’ Miracle stories served some Jesus movement as its myth of origins” (p. 215).

44. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 98–123.

presence."⁴⁵ Although "the usual view of the beginnings of Christianity derives from the Christ cults," Mack argues, "the sequence should be reversed."⁴⁶ "Instead of reading the material from the Jesus movements through the eyes of Paul, we need to read Paul as a remarkable moment in the history of some Jesus movement."⁴⁷

Second, there's Mack's detailed analysis of Mark's authorial, intellectual labor and his argument, in particular, that Mark is responsible for composing the passion narrative. Since the logic of the kerygma (i.e., creedal formulae about the "death and resurrection" of Christ, constructed as a myth to rationalize a social formation already under way) required that it need not be narrated—indeed, that it resist historicization⁴⁸—Mack argues, Mark had to find a way to "transpose the Christ myth into historical narrative." By "translating the Christ myth into a story of Jesus' martyrdom,"⁴⁹ Mark turned "the kerygma of Christ's death and resurrection into a formulaic prediction of the persecution plot" (cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).⁵⁰ In order to craft "a plausible narrative of

45. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 75–76.

46. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 96.

47. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 99. For a rethinking of the category "Christ cult" to refer to "a religious community that formed soon after the 'Christ event' (i.e., the 'death and resurrection' of Jesus understood as that event that changed the course of history and inaugurated the new Christian time) and that gathered for prayers, rituals, and instructions on the model of later Christian churches," see Mack, "Rereading the Christ Myth," 38, 65–71. Note, especially, that in this essay Mack has made a major revision of his initial discussions of the "congregations of the Christ," arguing now that "both the 'Christ myth' [1 Cor 15:3–5] and the 'ritual meal' text [1 Cor 11:23–25] can be traced to mythmaking within the Jesus schools at some point where the thought of Jesus as a martyr for their cause was entertained" (p. 37). See, most recently, Mack, "Cartwheels," 138; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope," 198.

48. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 254–55: "The kerygma was a mythic formulation without need of further narrative embellishment. It contained no flaw needing further adjustment, no gaps that still had to be filled. . . . The kerygma worked just because questions arising from historical placement and motivation had been bracketed. Thus the kerygmatic interpretation of Jesus' death actually resisted historicizing" (cf. 109–11, 120 n. 15, 278–80, 354–55 with n. 1).

49. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 157, adding: "There would have to be a provocation, an arrest, a charge, an ideological confrontation, some stories that made the executioners look both reasonable and wrong at the same time, some stories that revealed both Jesus' innocence and his willingness to die, some stories that showed how the disciples and the crowds responded to these last public events, an account of the execution, and some way to end the story after the crucifixion."

50. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 280, adding: "The intention of the rewriting was not innocent. . . . The predictions of the passion changed the kerygma into a script for writing an account of Jesus' death as a geopolitical event. Read in the light of the predictions, the passion plot unfolds exactly according to its prescription. . . . Time, place, agents, and consequences are all spelled out in the predictions and identifiable in the passion account. They purport to be the ingredients of a historical event, but this story does not derive from history. History was written according to the script of the persecution story."

Jesus' martyrdom," the "most important feature of Mark's strategy . . . was the use of the old [Jewish] wisdom tale of the wrongly accused righteous man as a pattern for the sequence of episodes leading up to the trials and crucifixion of Jesus."⁵¹ Mark "used the pattern of the wisdom story to conjoin myths of origin stemming from the Jesus movements on the one hand, with the myth of origin stemming from the Christ cult on the other. . . . The wisdom tale was the narrative device used to merge them. The gospel is the product of that accommodation."⁵² Therefore, Mack concludes:

It is now possible to emphasize that Mark's accomplishment was an authorial, intellectual achievement. In modern critical parlance, Mark's Gospel is a very richly textured story. Its most distinctive feature is the complexity of what critics call intertextuality, the domestication and integration of diverse texts, genres, and patterns of perception in the formation of a novel literary performance. Mark's Gospel stands at the intersection of many streams of cultural, literary, and social history. It was created by effort, intellectual effort, and it is marked by conscious authorial intention. Mark was a scholar. A reader of texts and a writer of texts. He was a scribe in the Jesus tradition of the synagogue reform movement. Mark's Gospel was not the product of divine revelation. It was not a pious transmission of revered tradition. It was composed at a desk in a scholar's study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals. . . . One "text" he did not have was a copy of the passion narrative because there was none until he wrote it. . . . The passion narrative is simply the climax of the new story line. The story was a new myth of origins. A brilliant appearance of the man of power, destroyed by those in league against God, pointed nonetheless to a final victory when those who knew the secret of his kingdom would finally be vindicated for accepting his authority.⁵³

"Viewed in retrospect . . . Mark's Gospel was the most important mythology constructed during the early period of Christian beginnings. . . . That is because it was Mark's plot that Christians settled upon when contemplating those events foundational to Christianity."⁵⁴ In writing his gospel, "a literary

51. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 157–58, building on the analyses of Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life*; Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative."

52. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 276, adding: "The passion narrative was conceived as a possibility by the discovery of the martyrological substrata of the Christ myth and ritual. . . . As soon as the narrative possibilities suggested by the term *paradidonai* ['to hand over'] were seen, the passion narrative was as good as written. Mark's passion narrative is essentially an elaboration of the etiological myth of the Hellenistic cult meal through combination with the wisdom story of the persecuted Righteous One as martyr" (pp. 303–4; cf. 268, 269, 299).

53. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 321–23; cf. 321–24 nn. 3–4. Arnal says this passage reflects the "central thesis" of Mack's book, demonstrating that "the only evidence we have for the first followers of Jesus is, precisely, *literary* evidence, and that therefore it attests to a literate, actively creative, intellectual, and therefore mediated . . . engagement with the world . . . a product of human labor" (review of *A Myth of Innocence*, 837, 840, emphasis original).

54. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 356, 357.

achievement of incomparable historical significance," Mark "laid the mythic foundation for the Christian religion. . . . Without this story . . . the emergence of Christianity as we know it would not have happened."⁵⁵

III

A Myth of Innocence is an intellectual achievement that put Mack's work forever firmly on the map. His subsequent studies of the NT and Christian origins, especially his analyses of the Gospel of Mark⁵⁶ and the Sayings Gospel Q,⁵⁷ were destined to be read in the light of this book, a work of scholarship that's made a difference. Accordingly, in order to assess the evidence and argumentation, conclusions and implications of Mack's book, a group of scholars launched, under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature, a Consultation (1995–1997) and subsequent Seminar (1998–2003) on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins, designed, in part, to test Mack's findings and devoted to the task of redescribing the beginnings of Christianity as religion. In his call paper for our first Consultation, Mack presented a critique of the canonical (gospel) myth of Christian origins:

For almost two thousand years, the Christian imagination of Christian origins has echoed the gospel stories contained in the New Testament. That is not surprising. The gospel accounts erased the pre-gospel histories; their inclusion within the church's New Testament consigned other accounts to oblivion; and during the long reach of Christian history, from the formation of the New Testament in the fourth century to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth, there was no other story. . . . According to Christian imagination, Christianity began when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified as the Christ and Son of God, appeared after his resurrection, overwhelmed his disciples with his holy spirit, established the first church in Jerusalem, and sent the apostles out on a mission to tell the world what they had seen and heard. Telling what they had seen was enough to convince the Jews and convert the gentiles into thinking that God had planned the whole thing in order to start a new religion. The new religion was about sin and redemption. What it took to start the new religion was all there as a kind of divine implantation in the life of Jesus, needing only to germinate and develop as early Christians heard about it, believed it, and came to understand its import. We might call this scenario the big bang concept of Christian origins. . . . Allowing the gospel paradigm to define Christian origins is quite understandable. It is the only scenario that everyone automatically shares, thus providing a comprehensive frame of reference

55. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 151, 161.

56. Mack, "Cartwheels"; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope."

57. Mack, "The Kingdom That Didn't Come"; Mack, "Lord of the Logia"; Mack, "Q and a Cynic-like Jesus"; Mack, *The Lost Gospel*.

for scholarly research and discourse. It serves as a kind of map within which we try to place our various, detailed labours. It also protects a set of assumptions about the way Christianity began, forming as it does the basis for what has been imagined as an otherwise inexplicable emergence of a brand new religion of unique conviction and singular faith. Something overwhelming must have possessed those early Christians, so the thinking has been, or they would not have converted to the new religion with its extraordinary claims. It is the gospel story that feeds that suspicion of an overwhelming something at the very beginning of the Christian time.⁵⁸

Arguing that “a redescription of Christian origins would ultimately have to account for the emergence of the gospels themselves, turning them into interesting products of early Christian thinking instead of letting them determine the parameters within which all of our data must find a place to rest,” Mack cautioned that the most “serious obstacle to a redescription project,” to “setting the gospel account aside,” is “the theory of religion implicit in our scholarship and naively assumed as natural”:

The historian of religion would say that New Testament scholars work with a concept of religion that is thoroughly and distinctly Christian in its derivation and definition. . . . Familiarity with the Christian religion has taken the place of theoretical discussion, and Christianity has provided us with the categories we use to name and explain early Christian phenomena. The problem is that the understanding of religion implicit in our discipline is inadequate for the task of redescribing Christian origins. . . . [Accordingly,] if we want to account for the emergence of Christianity, including the formation of groups and congregations, the development of their various practices and rituals, the production of their mythologies, and the writing of their literature . . . if we want to discover the reasons for and the motivations involved in their many investments in their

58. Mack, “Redescribing Christian Origins,” 247, 250, adding: “However, since the Enlightenment, the effort to understand Christian origins has been pursued by scholars as a matter of historical and literary criticism, and the New Testament account has slowly been dismantled. The New Testament is no longer seen by critical scholars as a coherent set of apostolic texts that document a single set of dramatic events and their monolinear history of subsequent influence and theological development. Instead of one gospel story, we have four different accounts within the New Testament and several other gospels that were not included. Instead of one picture of the historical Jesus that all early Christians must have had in view, we now have several competing views. We now know that there were many groups from the beginning, creating disparate traditions, responding to other groups differently, and developing various rituals and patterns of social congregation. Plural theologies and conflicting ideologies, as well as competing authorities and leaders, were the order of the day. So factors other than the marvels portrayed in the gospel account must have been at work. And yet, the older picture of Christian origins according to the gospel story, largely Lukan, is still in everyone’s mind. It is as if the emergence of Christianity cannot be accounted for any other way. It is as if the accumulation of critical information within the discipline of New Testament studies cannot compete with the gospel’s mystique” (pp. 247–48; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 59, 63, 60).

new associations . . . if we want to account for Christian origins as a thoughtful human construction . . . we need a theory of religion that gives the people their due. We need a theory of religion firmly anchored in a social and cultural anthropology, capable of sustaining a conversation with the humanities.⁵⁹

Mack's proposal for a redescription of Christian origins situates the study of Christian beginnings, and their social processes of mythmaking, within the context of the human sciences.⁶⁰ Arguing for a comparative method and an intellectualist approach to matters of theory, Mack suggests that a different perspective needs to be entertained as "a kind of lens . . . working hypothesis . . . [or] framework" to guide the task of redescription, a theory of religion that he presents in the form of five theses:

1. Religion is a social construct. . . . The myths, rituals, symbols, beliefs and patterns of thinking that are *shared* by a people . . . [are] cultural constructs [which] can be experienced and manipulated in a variety of ways by individuals, but it is their self-evident status as common cultural coin that marks them as the religion of a people.
2. Social formation defines the human enterprise. Constructing societies large and small is what people do. It is a fragile, collective craft requiring enormous amounts of negotiation, experimentation, living together, and talking . . . result[ing] in very complex arrangements of relationships, agreements reached on better and less better ways to do things, and practices established to pass on the knowledge and skills accumulated in the process. . . . [If] ask[ed] about the reasons for and the processes whereby early Christian myths and rituals were first conceived and agreed upon . . . [the answer would be that] the Jesus movements and the congregations of the Christ were attractive as intentional experiments in social formation and mythmaking.
3. Myths acknowledge the collective gifts and constraints of the past and create a foil or gap for thinking critically about the present state of a group's life together. . . . Early Christians entertained fantastic mythologies, not because they were overwhelmed by encounters with a god or a son of God, but because they wanted to comprehend and justify their investments in a movement that made social sense to them.
4. Rituals are the way humans have of concentrating attention on some activity or event of some significance to a group, and observing its performance apart from normal practice. . . . Rituals are social occasions,

59. Mack, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 248, 251, 252, 254; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 60–61, 64, 63, 65, 67–68.

60. Mack, "The Christian Origins Project."

require roles, invite attendance, display skills, confirm loyalties, trigger commitments, evoke thoughtfulness, and reconstitute the structure of a group without having to engineer it any other way.

5. Mythmaking and social formation go together. . . . Experimentation and bricolage mark the ways in which myths get rearranged and groups reform. . . . Even the most daring social experiments and the most fantastic mythic constructs turn out to be thoughtful and constructive attempts to regain sanity in a social situation that threatens human well-being. In the case of early Christians . . . the making of their myths and the processes of forming social groups were constructive and thoughtful human activities. And [so,] whenever we have the chance to catch sight of both mythmaking and social formation happening at the same time in the same place, we need to explore the relationship of the one to the other.⁶¹

The theory of religion which Mack proposes here takes mythmaking to be a correlate to social formation. "By noting the way in which a group had formed and the role it saw itself playing in the larger scheme of things," Mack writes, "we can place each of our texts at a particular moment in the history of early Christian groups and see how each was responding to its times."⁶² Mack's thesis—the identification of a nexus, or correlation, between mythmaking and social formation, which regards their intersection or juncture as "a moment of social and discursive activity that is generative"⁶³—gave rise to a serious theoretical debate among members of the Seminar.⁶⁴ It was clear that more work needed to be done, to see whether, and how, we can "specify the nexus between mythmaking and social formation without assuming a relationship of conformity, causality, or reciprocity," and how in our "concept of intersections

61. Mack, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 254, 255–56, emphasis original; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 68, 69, 70.

62. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 11, adding: "The scholarly terms for these activities, one behavioral, the other intellectual, are *social formation* and *mythmaking*. Social formation and mythmaking are group activities that go together, each stimulating the other in a kind of dynamic feedback system. Both speed up when new groups form in times of social disintegration and cultural change. Both are important indicators of the personal and intellectual energies invested in experimental movements. . . . Social formation and mythmaking must therefore be given a prominent place in our redescription of early Christian history. In every early Christian community from which we still have any evidence, social formation and mythmaking fit together like hand in glove" (emphasis original; cf. 11–15).

63. Mack, "Remarkable," 472.

64. See Arnal and Braun, "Social Formation and Mythmaking," 460–62; cf. 459–67; Mack, "Backbay Jazz and Blues," 422–23, 427–28; Mack, "Remarkable," 472–73; Martin, "History, Historiography, and Christian Origins," 271–72; Martin, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 476–77; Smith, "*Dayyeinu*," 486; Cameron and Miller, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 17–18, 20–22; Cameron and Miller, "Issues and Commentary," 454–56; Cameron and Miller, "Conclusion: Redescribing Christian Origins," 511–16; cf. 497–516.

or junctures of mythmaking and social formation," we can "include situations of incongruity or discrepancy, ways to describe gaps between myths and social circumstances."⁶⁵

Mack's efforts to make sense of the logic and historical legacy of the gospel story as the origin of the myth of Christian origins mean that he had to work out, more systematically, the theoretical underpinnings of his argument, not just in terms of mythmaking and social formation but also in terms of social interests (as a way to talk about collective motivations) and social logic (our category for the relationship of a given myth to the processes of social formation). Noting the way that the term "interest" is used by Jonathan Z. Smith for the features of an exemplary myth or ritual that Smith finds intellectually "interesting" or is "interested" in, Mack suggests that *interest*, a term that combines "connotations of curiosity about, and investment in, a matter," while also delineating "a complex, purposive process,"⁶⁶ can be used to construct a social theory of religion. "Interest" (1) captures "the sense we have that a social system both limits and directs the use of power, persuasion or force," thus giving "the impression of purpose, objective, and motivation"; (2) it does not have "any distinctively religious connotations, but can be used in regard to any system of signs, practices, or social structures, including religion"; (3) it bears "the connotation of inquisitiveness, thus making it possible to include intellectual activity and cognitive functions within the cluster of activities that produce a social system"; (4) it carries "the connotation of reward due an investment," a "motivational nuance for the intellectual labor required to produce a religion"; and, (5) it is also "thoroughly constructive . . . as a general term for collective motivation," for taking interest, and being invested, in the human enterprise.⁶⁷ And so, building on his initial discussions of a possible Jesus school in Jerusalem, having some connection to the Jesus movements—not the congregations of the Christ—and interest in Jewish identity,⁶⁸ and of the social situation and underlying social interests that can be inferred when the term *christos* first took hold as a designation for Jesus,⁶⁹ Mack began work on a series of studies in quest of a "social theory of

65. Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 515; see, in addition, Cameron and Miller, "Introducing Paul and the Corinthians," 8, 15; Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians," 290, 302. The most recent publication of the Seminar has addressed this issue in detail. See Crawford, "Introduction," 3–6, 14; cf. 8–10; Smith, "Conjectures on Conjunctions," 30–32, 59–62, 67–72 with nn. 118–20; Smith, "The Markan Site," 99–104, 112, 118, 120 with n. 36; Mack, "Cartwheels," 127–32, 142–43; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope," 202–5; Arnal, "On Smith, On Myth, on Mark," 153–62; Matthews, "Markan Grapplings," 170–77; Miller, "The Social Logic of the Gospel of Mark," 222–23 n. 34, 228–30, 256–57, 379; cf. 394–96, 398; Crawford and Miller, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 543, 547–48, 550–51.

66. Mack, "Religion and Ritual," 69. See, for example, Smith's own remarks in the "Discussion" of his paper on "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 206–7, 209–11, 215, 222–24.

67. Mack, "A Radically Social Theory of Religion," 131–32.

68. Mack, "A Jewish Jesus School in Jerusalem?"

69. Mack, "Why *Christos*?"

religion," a "theory of religion that can explain Christian origins," a theory of "religion as social interest."⁷⁰

*Myth and the Christian Nation*⁷¹ is the book that presents Mack's social theory of religion in a programmatic way, and that develops the initial critique he made of the logic and legacy of Mark's Gospel,⁷² and then elaborated in critical assessments of innocence and power in the Gospel of Mark⁷³ and of the legacy of the Bible as Christian myth in the mentality of contemporary American culture.⁷⁴ Mack's "thesis," that "religion is a mode of thinking about social constructions," and his "theory," of "religion as social interest" — "religion as a human construction in the interest of the human enterprise of social formation" — mean that this book is a "study of religion as a human investment in social interests."⁷⁵ *Social interest* is the category Mack uses to refer to collective motivations, to describe the "collective investments" humans take "in the construction of society."⁷⁶ Observing "some obvious links between social structures and practices on the one hand, and themes common to myths and rituals on the other," and noticing "the ways in which [myths and rituals] relate to social practices, interests,

70. Mack, "Explaining Religion," 83, 91, adding: "The concept of *religion as social interest*" means that "religion is generated by social interests, and that it functions to maintain and manipulate social interest just as the other systems of signs and patterns of practices that structure human societies" (p. 84, emphasis original). See Mack, "Explaining Christian Mythmaking"; Mack, "Social Formation."

71. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*.

72. Not only is "the Christian gospel . . . the lens through which Western culture has viewed the world," Mack writes. "The Christian gospel continues to function as the lens by which the world is viewed, ordered, and interpreted" (*Myth of Innocence*, 368, 369; cf. 353–76, esp. 368–76).

73. "Mark set Jesus in opposition to the Pharisaic laws of purity and the sacrificial system of the temple cult," Mack writes. "In Mark's depiction, Jesus represented power, sheer power, the power of God in confrontation with the power of the Jewish high priest, the power of the Jewish king, and the power of the Roman empire. Jesus' power was pure, but it was a kind of purity other than [that] assumed by the temple system. Jesus was pure, not because he resided at the pinnacle of priestly activity, but because he was the (royal) Son of God by virtue of an anointing with the holy Spirit from God. The holy spirit in Jesus was out to rout the unclean spirits in control of the worldly kingdoms. This was a new notion of purity, a union of sovereign sacrality and priestly holiness. . . . Mark's gospel introduced the notion of innocence to the characterization of Jesus as the man of power and purity. . . . Jesus became the Christian symbol of a social anthropology in which power, purity, and innocence implode in the moment of [crucified] violence. . . . Power, purity, and innocence had been collapsed in the single figure of Jesus as the Son of God who, from Mark's perspective, had every right to violate the temple and challenge the sovereignty of the Second Temple state. . . . It is the concentration of power, purity and innocence in a single anthropological figure . . . that marks [America's] mythological mentality" (Mack, "Power, Purity, and Innocence," 253, 254, 255, 260; cf. 258, repr., with revisions, in *Christian Myth*, 142–43, 145, 150; cf. 148–49).

74. See Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power"; Mack, *Christian Mentality*; Mack, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*.

75. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, xi, 72, 11, xii; cf. 274–75.

76. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 75; cf. 52, 72–76, 78, 255.

and situations," Mack illustrates "the thematic links between myths and rituals and . . . social interests" with a "short list . . . of social interests that can then be studied in relation to the structures of particular societies." The list includes territory, the people, rites of passage, food production (both agrarian and pastoral), ancestors, memorial festivals, systems of tuition, kinship, classification, and exchange.⁷⁷ "When the interests derived from the other systems that structure human societies are transposed into the imaginary worlds of myth and ritual," Mack notes, "their transposition . . . in mythic mode . . . triggers a transformation of the theme." Thus, for example:

Interest in kinship as a system may shift to interest in ancestral legends, genealogy, and descent. Mapping one's territory is often transfigured as an account of creation. Technologies of production are imagined as discoveries, inventions, or first-time stories. Tuition takes the form of example stories set in a fantastic world or past. The alreadiness of social arrangements is often accounted for in terms of origin stories in which precedence is established by patriarchs, powers, and authorities not accessible for questioning.⁷⁸

"When compared with the other systems of signs and patterns of practices that structure human societies," Mack writes, "systems of myth and ritual manifest three distinctive characteristics":

(1) they focus attention upon figures and actions in orders of time and space at a distance from the everyday world of activity; (2) they exaggerate the descriptions of the figures and activities that inhabit those imaginary worlds in ways that mark them as different from their counterparts in the world of actual experience; and (3) they may include the attributes of intention and performance of the frequently powerful agents located in those imaginary worlds. In sum: imaginary world; fantastic features; powerful agents.⁷⁹

"Myths and rituals enlarge the empirical world of a society to include a world of the imagination that encompasses the past and future of a people," as well as "the forces of nature that impinge upon the practices of the people." They also "mark moments of social interests, social practices, and the cultivation of customary habits of thought."⁸⁰ This means, Mack argues, that "myths and rituals should not be thought of as practices that cultivate 'religious' interests in contrast to social interests and practical interests. They are the ways in which the expanded *habitus* of human societies is acknowledged, memorialized, manipulated, and contested. Religion thus explained is not only part and parcel of the systems that structure human societies; its distinctive functions appear to be essential extensions of the other systems of signs and patterns of practices.

77. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 52; cf. 42–44, 52–76.

78. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 78.

79. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 76.

80. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 76, 84.

Myths and rituals are not only generated by social interests, they are the ways in which social interests continue to be shaped, criticized, thought about, and argued over in the ongoing maintenance of a society.⁸¹ Accordingly, inasmuch as “myths take the form of narratives in which deities are protagonists of actions that take place at a juncture where the human world and the natural environment are imagined to meet in dynamic relations,” myths and rituals provide “our data for developing a social theory of ‘religion’ that can then be used to analyze the social logic of the Christian myth and ritual system” as “a grammar that supports Christian mentality” and as “a legacy that is still at work among us.”⁸²

Having developed a set of categories to explain the social interests and intellectual investments at work in myths and rituals, Mack turns to early Christian mythmaking and applies these categories to a redescription of Christianity as a religion, tracing a three-hundred year history from its beginnings to the time of Constantine and the establishment of Christendom as the official religion of the empire, with the church’s Bible, creed, and rituals, basilicas, patterns of pilgrimage, and systems of patronage.⁸³ The momentous changes that resulted from the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century transformed Mark’s myth of origins into the primary myth and ritual text for the Christian church, the mythic foundation and charter for Christendom. Therefore, Mack concludes his remarkable study of Mark and Christian origins with a redescriptive definition of Christianity as religion:

And so it is that a single event, composite and complex, has haunted the Christian imagination for nearly two thousand years. That event is the manifestation of divine authority and power breaking into human history, coming to a violent climax in the crucifixion of God’s Son. His vindication by resurrection . . . envisages the radical transformation of human society intended, and guarantees the eventual actualization of the perfectly just and peaceable kingdom. . . . The history of the Christian religion can be told as the history of re-imagining the event of the Christ. [Since] the Christ event is a symbol of

81. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 81, emphasis original.

82. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 87, 44, 12, 13. For a discussion of “the myth and ritual systems of Christianity as structures of an imagined world,” and of the “mentality” of a Christian culture and the “mythic grammar” that “underlies certain ways of thinking” about the world (p. 183), see pp. 193–99 (describing the “imagined world” where agents, personified as gods, and events can be located), pp. 199–209 (describing the “mentality” taken for granted and characteristic of a people), pp. 200–203 (describing the mythic “structure” of the imagined world of Christendom, given with the myth-ritual system), pp. 203–9 (describing the “grammar” for thinking about the real world and all that happens within it, and for making judgments about situations and circumstances that arise); see also Mack, “Christ and the Creation of a Monocratic Culture,” 166–70; Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 44–51.

83. See Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 146–99, citing Smith, *To Take Place*, 74–95, 154–70; see also Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 38–41; Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 357, 361–64.

radical transformation . . . the history of Christianity can be told as the history of the representation of the Christ event as the vision and vehicle of what the world must become. . . . To imagine the Christ event is to imagine the originary event that generates personal faith even as it generates the history of the church. . . . The church is [thus] a social historical institution that defines itself in the act of replicating its origination by means of the symbols of its origin.⁸⁴

Thus it was that “Mark’s fiction of the passion, contrary to his own intentions, provided inadvertently the text for a marvelous ritual system designed to enact in the present those events at the beginning that marked the origination of the church.”⁸⁵

IV

Mack’s efforts to make sense—“social sense”—of the beginnings of the Christian religion entail not only his critique of “the scholarly quest for the origins of Christianity” as an undertaking that “has, in effect, been driven by the Christian imagination,” and his argument that “if one wants to understand the origins of the Christian gospel of origins, one must study the way in which Mark fabricated his story, and determine why he wrote it the way he did.”⁸⁶ The “structure and function of the gospel thus created” are also always in view. Mack’s book is thus “about the plotting of [Mark’s] myth of origins and its designs upon the social histories, both of those who first produced it, and of those who still accept its charter.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, Mack is at pains to “trace out the circumstances and reflections that led to the formation of such a dramatic myth of origins” and to “assess [Mark’s] accomplishment and its legacy,” a “legacy of almost two thousand years’ duration,” indeed, “a legacy for the most part unrecognized by those influenced by it as the story of modern scholarship, Christian mission, and Western imperialism demonstrates.”⁸⁸ By concluding his study of the Gospel of Mark and Christian origins with a critical appraisal of the “narrative logic”⁸⁹ and “legacy”⁹⁰ of the Markan myth, and of the Christian “mentality”⁹¹ that takes it all for granted—as self-evident gospel truth—Mack

84. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 365, 366; cf. 364–68.

85. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 363.

86. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 23, 24, 8, 12, adding: “It was Mark’s fiction of a fantastic infringement on human history that created Christianity’s charter. . . . By locating the Christ myth precisely as an originary event complete with social historical motivation and consequence, Mark created the story that was to give to Christian imagination its sense of a radical and dramatic origin in time. . . . Because Mark’s plot provided the narrative logic for the other gospels . . . Mark’s Gospel must be seen as the origin for the Christian view of Christian origins” (pp. 353, 355, 357; cf. xii, 3–4, 9, 16).

87. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 24.

88. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 12, 14; cf. 353–76, esp. 368–76.

89. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 357, 367, 375; cf. 349, 376.

90. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 368, 372, 374.

91. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 370, 372–73, 376.

shows that he intends his work to be understood as a contribution to the study of religion as cultural critique.⁹²

Mack's subsequent analyses of the social logic and legacy of the Christian myth and mentality in Western (American) culture constitute, collectively, an ongoing research project on the cultural influence of the Christian myth and on the state of the Christian nation. Mack would present an outline of the project in an essay on the "origins, logic, and legacy" of *The Christian Myth* in American society, culture, and politics,⁹³ which he has pursued in a series of comparative studies of religion in culture.⁹⁴ But he already began to explore the implications of a critique of the Christian myth and a Christian mythic "mentality" in the conclusions to his earlier, book-length studies of the NT and Christian origins.⁹⁵ In his book on the Sayings Gospel Q, Mack noted the crucial difference that Q makes for redescribing Christian beginnings, arguing that, as a sayings gospel,⁹⁶ Q issues a "challenge [that] strikes to the heart of the traditional understanding of Christian origins." It's not just that "Q effectively challenges the privilege granted the narrative gospels as depictions of the historical Jesus." The "discovery of Q makes it possible to have another look at Christian origins, recognize common human strategies in the construction of myths and rituals, and study the process by which an attractive alternative to traditional social identities produced a new religion based on a new social anthropology." Q therefore "shifts the focus of conversation about Christian origins away from fascination with the many myths condensed in the New Testament and on to the people

92. See Mack, "Caretakers and Critics," whose essay constitutes "a meditation on the social role of the scholar [of] religion" (p. 32): a challenge to "think of our task as critics of cultures" (p. 38), and a call to engage in "cultural critique" (p. 37) and use "our critical tools to contribute to the task of working out a theory of religion in society" (p. 36).

93. Mack, "The Christian Myth and the Christian Nation," 191.

94. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 217–75, who notes that "this book is not only a study about religions and social interests as they have been seen and created throughout human history. It is also [his] attempt to render a cultural critique of the Christian mentality at work in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (p. 275); Mack, *Christian Mentality*; Mack, *Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*.

95. See Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 238, 250–53; Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 288–89, 292, 298, 302–4; cf. 96.

96. For a discussion and critical assessment of the historiographical consequences and cognitive advantage of taking sayings gospels—Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*—seriously as alternate beginnings that do not support the dominant (gospel) paradigm of Christian origins, as, collectively, a set of texts that constitute alternative points of departure to the typical assumption of the apocalyptic and kerygmatic orientation of the first followers of Jesus, see Cameron, "The *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins"; Cameron, "Alternate Beginnings—Different Ends"; Cameron, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins"; Cameron, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 39–40, 50–54; Cameron and Miller, "Issues and Commentary," 444–45; Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 497–503; Miller, "Introduction to the Papers from the Third Year of the Consultation," 33, 37–39; Miller, "Discussion and Reflections," 136–38.

who produced them," people "struggling with a social vision." As such, "Q's challenge is absolute and critical. It drives a wedge between the story as told in the narrative gospels [of the New Testament] and the history they are thought to record. . . . The story of Q demonstrates that the narrative gospels have no claim as historical accounts. The gospels are imaginative creations whose textual resources and social occasions can be identified. The reasons for their compositions can be explained. They are documents of intellectual labor normal for people in the process of experimental group formation." This means that "Q's challenge to the conventional picture of Christian origins is more far-reaching than the making of a little room for yet another early Christian movement." On the one hand, "the Jesus movement documented by Q cannot be understood as a variant form of the Christian persuasion basic to the conventional picture of Christian origins." For "with Q in view the entire landscape of early Christian history and literature has to be revised." On the other, "Q forces the issue of rethinking Christian origins as no other document from the earliest times has done." Q invites us "to see ourselves with myths on our hands" and "find it possible to make some contribution to the urgent task of cultural critique where it seems to matter most—understanding the social consequences of Christian mythology." For "if we take Q seriously, it will turn the quest for Christian origins into a question about our willingness to seriously engage in cultural critique."⁹⁷

Mack extends these findings in his introduction to the NT, in order to explain the making of the Christian myth and the formation of the Christian

97. Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 245, 250, 248, 256, 247, 7, 5, 257–58, 11, adding: "Myths, mentalities, and cultures go together. Myths are celebrated publicly in story and song. Mentalities are nurtured just beneath the surface of social conventions by means of unexpressed agreements. Myths, mentalities, and cultural agreements function at a level of acceptance that might be called sanctioned and therefore restricted from critical thought. Myths are difficult to criticize because mentalities turn them into truths held to be self-evident, and the analysis of such cultural assumptions is seldom heard as good news." Although "we do not know how to talk about the mentalities that underlie a culture's system of meanings, values, and attitudes . . . in order to get to the heart of the matter, we need to break the taboo against talking about our myths. Cultural critique without exposing the myths that support the truths held to be self-evident is merely interesting, not telling. . . . Q should help with this analysis by breaking the taboo that now grants privilege to the Christian myth. That is because the story of Q gives us an account of Christian origins that is not dependent upon the narrative gospels. That is a great advantage. Christian mythology can now be placed among the many mythologies and ideologies of the religions and cultures of the world. The Christian myth can be studied as any other myth is studied. It can be evaluated for its proposal of ways to solve social problems, construct sane societies, and symbolize human values. The gospel can be discussed as an enculturating mythology, and the question of its influence in American culture can be pursued without the constant interruption of questions and claims about the historical truth of unique events. . . . The question now is whether the discovery of Q has any chance of making a difference in the way in which Christianity and its gospel are viewed in modern times" (pp. 251, 253, 254, 247).

Bible, which was “created when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire” in the fourth century.⁹⁸ Addressing the ways in which the Bible is invested with “mystique” as “sacred scripture,” “taken for granted as a special book,” and treated deferentially “as if it spoke with a single voice,” as a book “with a single message,” Mack analyzes how the Bible functions as the foundational myth for Western (Christian) civilization, “works its magic in our [own] culture,” and “influences our collective sense of values and patterns of thinking” as Americans, as if we “take our place in history by unreflected reference to the Bible.” In course, Mack examines “the logic that resulted in the Bible”⁹⁹ as a selection and collection of texts, arranged in just a certain order according to “centrist” theological purposes,¹⁰⁰ that, taken together, serve as a kind of “constitution” or “charter” that historians of religion would call “myth.” As myth, Mack argues, “the Christian myth”—the “myth of origin for the Christian religion”¹⁰¹—the Bible functions in three basic ways: as (1) “epic” for “the American dream,” as (2) the “myth and ritual text” for the Christian religion, and as (3) an “oracle” in “popular parlance and practice.”¹⁰²

Epic, Mack writes, “is a rehearsal of the past that puts the present in its light. Setting the present in the light of an illustrious past makes it honorable, legitimate, right, and reasonable. The present institution is then worth celebrating. Naturally, both the past and the present may be highly romanticized or idealized, for epic is myth in the genre of history.”¹⁰³ *Epic* has been a central analytical category for Mack since his initial studies of Ben Sira’s interpretation of the Torah as “the epic history of Israel,” read “on the model of Hellenistic historiography.”¹⁰⁴ In his scholarship on Christian beginnings, Mack has elaborated upon his use of epic as a critical, comparative category.¹⁰⁵ In *Who Wrote the New Testament*, for example, Mack uses “epic” to (re)describe (1) the history of Israel as the Jewish epic, “aimed at the establishment of a temple-state in Jerusalem”;¹⁰⁶ (2) the Jesus movement’s efforts, eventually, to align Jesus with the story of Israel as “its destined agent of change,” a form of “mythmaking” that can be called “epic revision”;¹⁰⁷ (3) the ways in which Paul attempted a

98. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 293; cf. 287.

99. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 1, 2, 3, 15.

100. “It was centrist Christianity,” Mack writes, “that became the religion of empire under Constantine, collected together the texts we now know as the New Testament, and joined them to the Jewish scriptures to form the Christian Bible” (*Who Wrote the New Testament*, 6; cf. 6–8, 199–206, 225–28, 252, 259, 267–68).

101. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 7, 8, 15; cf. 13, 275–76.

102. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 296, 297; cf. 15–16.

103. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 14.

104. Mack, “Under the Shadow of Moses,” 313, 314; see also Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, 114–16; Mack, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 75–77, 80–83.

105. See Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 30, 33–35, 38–39, 46–49, 54, 64, 76, 78, 92–93, 101, 108, 120–22, 128–29, 135–37, 149, 160, 168–69, 196, 215, 217–19, 224, 238, 318, 320, 359.

106. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 14, 15; cf. 35–37, 278–79.

107. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 161, 71, 73; cf. 283.

major "revision" of Israel's epic, reinterpreting the Christ myth and redefining "the constitution of Israel" to argue that gentiles could "belong to the family of God without being Jewish";¹⁰⁸ (4) Luke's fiction of an "apostolic" myth in the book of Acts, to construct an "epic history" of Christian origination;¹⁰⁹ (5) the central contribution of Justin Martyr to the creation of the "Christian epic," specifically, to "reading . . . the epic of Israel in order to make it end with the Christ," in support of "the claim . . . that Christians were the legitimate heirs of the epic of Israel, that the Jews had never understood the intentions of their God, and that the story of Israel, if one read it rightly, was 'really' about the coming of Christ";¹¹⁰ and, in general, (6) early Christians' appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as essential to the creation of the Christian Bible, a revision of the Jewish epic that combines "the Jewish scriptures and the apostolic writings" in a single book, which "could be used to claim antiquity for the Christian religion and serve as the Christian epic," provide an authoritative "charter for being a legitimate religion," and thus enable the church to "claim a firm foundation for its system of myth and ritual."¹¹¹ As epic, "our myth of God's designs upon both our past and our promise,"¹¹² the Bible "provides a worldview for Christians and their culture" that "defines [their] place . . . in the world and makes that place seem legitimate,"¹¹³ and that includes "an implicit claim to know the truth about God, history, and the human situation that other people do not know."¹¹⁴ As our epic, the Bible has become the "mythic template" for a "Christian mentality" that's "rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition."¹¹⁵

108. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 115, 117; cf. 121, 135, 137, 142–43, 284.

109. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 233, 234, 236; cf. 225–26, 238.

110. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 252, adding: "[Here] we are at the point where the beginnings of Christian theology and the construction of the Christian epic were the same enterprise" (cf. 259–73, esp. 262, 267–68).

111. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 290–91, adding: "The Old Testament cast light on the antiquity of the church's theology and creed. The gospels rendered an account of the church's origin and mission in the light of the Old Testament. The gospels and the letters centered on the singular events of the last supper and the death of the Christ, thus providing the scripts for Christian myth and ritual. And the apostolic literature provided a mandate for the mission of the church in the world and for the succession of its bishops in charge of its social institutions" (p. 291; cf. 300–301).

112. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 15.

113. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 32.

114. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 302, adding: "The biblical epic is based on a worldview that is universalist in scope, monolinear in historical imagination, a singular system in organic conception, hierarchical in the location of power, dualistic in anthropology, and which has to have miracles, breakthroughs, and other dramatic or divine moments of rectification to imagine the adjustments that humans have to make when life and social circumstances change or get out of hand" (p. 306).

115. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 292, 303, adding: "Without the Bible the Christian myth would evaporate. . . . Without the epic framework provided by the Bible, all the other myths, rituals, and notions of salvation that have become traditional to the Christian religion would disintegrate or mutate. . . . The fundamental reason for the Bible's importance" lies in the claim that "it is the story of God's purposes for humankind. The Bible is where the Christian notions of God and history are intertwined, the paradigms of salvation are

As the myth and ritual text for the Christian church, the Bible serves as “the script for Christian worship.” Merging archaic patterns of gathering for “covenant renewal” from the Ancient Near East and the Greek religious practice of gathering for festival (sacrificial) meals, Christians created their own forms of ritual congregation to celebrate such occasions for “memorial” and “epic rehearsal.” In Christian worship, “the readings from the Old Testament function as epic rehearsal” and “the readings from the New Testament function as . . . a call to covenant renewal.” In “the merger of myth and ritual in Christian practice . . . the Christian myth became a script for ritual reenactment in the medieval church, and the Christian ritual became a reenactment of the mythic script.”¹¹⁶

And as an oracle, the Bible is thought to “produce insights and instructions that address human circumstances of our time.” Such an impression is “an accidental by-product of the way the Bible combines two different collections of writings, the Old and the New Testaments. The way these two collections are connected forms a kind of equation for solving theoretical problems and produces a kind of grammar for thinking about human situations. The uncanny aspect of this equation is that it automatically activates cognitive functions that are basic for any and all human thought. Ultimately, it is the way this equation stimulates thought that gives the Bible its fascination as a book of sacred oracles and teases the reader into thinking that it holds the secret to profound understanding.”¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Mack argues:

The Bible’s intrigue as a heady cognitive grammar is hardly ever consciously recognized by those who read it as the Word of God. It is [simply] taken for granted that the two collections of texts are different because history actually went that way, and that each collection has to be read at two levels of signification in order to understand the significance of that history. One of these collections, the Old Testament, automatically invites layered meanings and must be allegorized in order to understand the need for Christianity. The other, the New Testament, requires an imaginary replication of events in order to produce Christian experience. It is not recognized that allegorizing the Old Testament is a setup for

set, the thrust toward the future is generated, and the charter for Christianity to expand throughout the world is given. . . . The Bible is the Christian myth. The Christian myth is the Bible . . . a complete and closed book of sacred scripture, a book to be consulted, but not to be explained” (p. 276).

116. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 300, 301, adding: “Thus the ‘then’ of the Christian myth is made present in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of ritual; and entering the ‘here’ of ritual becomes the occasion for being transported into the imaginary world of the myth. . . . This means that Christian worship is designed to (con)fuse the imagination of the biblical times and places with their present reenactment in ritual in the interest of accentuating the sense of contrast between the mythic world that the church represents and the world as it is experienced in the host society” (p. 301; cf. 290–91, citing Smith, *To Take Place*, 109–14, 175–76).

117. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 297; cf. 15–16, 297–300, citing Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells”; Smith, *To Take Place*, 42–46, 142–46.

the significance with which the New Testament is loaded. . . . With such an equation of two such laden texts, however, the possibilities for using the Bible to analyze any human problem are endless. That is because the equation activates basic cognitive functions of comparison and contrast, offers a very rich reservoir of narrative imagery, and provides a lens for both the ironic and paradigmatic interpretation of all human events, both then and now, simultaneously.¹¹⁸

In his most recent work Mack has continued his efforts to redescribe the beginnings of Christianity, refine his social theory of religion, and explore the implications of both for a critical assessment of the social logic and cultural influence of the Christian myth. He has, in particular, substantially expanded his concept of "social interests"¹¹⁹ and engaged in detail the research project of Vincent L. Wimbush in the Institute for Signifying Scriptures,¹²⁰ a project that investigates "the ways in which African Americans and other peoples oppressed by Euro-American societies registered a critique of the dominant culture by appropriating the stories of the Bible in their own interests."¹²¹ Since

118. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 298–99, adding: "In the Old Testament a word or event has to refer to two different orders of discourse synchronically." Thus, for example, "the paschal lamb is first the Jewish paschal lamb, but it 'really' refers to Jesus Christ as God's eternal intention. The double meaning of the words and events in the New Testament, on the other hand, is found in their application to a then and a now," diachronically, except that in this instance "it is a matter of the same event taking place at two different times in Christian history. Every Christian knows, however, that the events recorded in the New Testament were 'unique' and that they happened 'once for all.' Nevertheless, it is just these events that are reenacted regularly in Christian ritual and recalled vividly to the Christian imagination whenever the New Testament is read. . . . Recreating these New Testament events by reading, recall, and response is an operation of memory and imagination fundamental for Christian thought and mentality. That vital contact with the originary past is what the church must repeatedly make available to Christians in order to live up to its charter as the vehicle of human transformation. This means that the marvelous intermingling of the unique event and its replication"—a "contradiction in terms," to be sure—"or the sense of the incomparable Christ event as paradigmatic of the 'novel' and the 'new' in every Christian's own experience, is also a product of the Bible's cognitive equation" (p. 298; cf. 297).

119. See Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 7, 11, 26, 52, 56–58, 60, 62–63, 65–67, 70, 83, 89, 91, 108, 113; Mack, *Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*, 12, 37–38, 41, 46–50, 57–59, 66, 69, 71, 76, 78, 81, 85–88, 90–91, 93, 95, 100–101, 116, 118, 120–25, 129, 145, 148–50, 167, 174–75, 183–89, 194–201, 226, 241, 243, 248, 252–53, 265–66, 269–71, 276, 281; Mack, "Cartwheels," 133–34.

120. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," citing Wimbush, "Biblical Historical Study as Liberation"; Wimbush, ed., *The Bible and the American Myth*; Wimbush, "Introduction: Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures"; Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*; Wimbush, "Introduction: TEXTureS, Gestures, Power." See, in addition, Wimbush's 2010 Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate."

121. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 5. As Wimbush puts it, "How might putting African Americans at the center of the study of the Bible affect the study of the Bible? . . . What if the reading of and thinking about the Bible—that third rail of almost all discursive and ideological formations that have led to the constitution of the West—

“the African American intellectual tradition and its resignification of the Bible [are] cultural critique (of the dominant culture) and cultural confirmation (of the African American culture) at one and the same time,” Wimbush is engaged in what Mack would call “the intellectual labor involved in resignifying the Bible as cultural myth in our time,” in a “rereading on the part of oppressed peoples” that’s both “a critique of the dominant society and its traditional reading of the Bible” and “a reimagination of the biblical stories to reflect the histories of an oppressed people’s social situation and cultural ‘texture.’” The “intellectual labor” of “signifying” biblical stories as “scripture” refers to “the way in which a people heard, understood, and retold their own histories by seeing themselves in reflexive relation to the stories of the Bible.” Signifying scriptures is thus a “dynamic process of imaginative activity critical for the collective discourse of a people,”¹²² which issues in their “empowerment”—“freedom from the control of the dominant culture”—“the ‘empowerment’ that results from the practice of signifying upon the Bible as scripture” and that “has to do with cultural identity as that which is discovered, created, and celebrated in the signifying conversa-

were read through African American experience? . . . Centering the study of the Bible upon African Americans would be a defiant intellectual and political act. . . . The African American engagement of the Bible is too much a rupture, a disruption, a disturbance or explosion of the Europeanized and white Protestant North American spin on the Bible and its traditions not to begin with the fundamental and open questions that can inspire the most nuanced intellectual work. How could one, having taken seriously the foregrounding of the African American engagement of the Bible, not begin with *the fundamental question, which is not about the meaning of any text but about the whole quest for meaning (in relationship to a [sacred] text)?* . . . I [therefore] propose that African American experience, or what African American experience can come to represent, be placed at the center of the serious study of the Bible, including academic study of the Bible. Rather than [be] seen as an attempt simply to force a different dominant center in place, this ‘centering’ of African American experience should actually represent an attempt at the *de*-centering and explosion of all prevailing interpretive paradigms; it should represent the call to make room for and to take seriously what the study of the Bible should be about as a type of cultural practice, why it should perdure, and on what terms. . . . [Such a] project presents to academic biblical studies the most defiant challenge: it argues that the point of departure for and even the crux of interpretation not be texts but worlds, [namely,] society and culture and the complex textu(r)alizations of society and culture. Further, it argues that this point of departure should begin in a different time—not with the (‘biblical’) past but with the present, that is, with the effort to understand how the present is being shaped by the Bible (which then provides warrant for forays into the past)” (“Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” 2, 8, 9, 12, 19, emphasis original).

122. Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 14, 7, 6, 21; cf. 9, 11, 13–14, 20–25, 30, 102–12, 115–16, 124–27. Wimbush’s choice of “the term *scripture*,” Mack notes, “makes it possible to escape the connotations of the Bible that Christians have loaded upon it even while allowing it to take its place as one among many other texts produced by our and other cultures. . . . *Scripture* becomes a cipher to hold the place for all of the ‘texts’ written by people from out of their lives together and whose careful reading and writing, given this insight about human social formation, can be called ‘signifying’” (p. 20, emphasis original). The technical term *signifying* is taken, in part, from Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying”; Long, *Significations*; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.

tions" of a people.¹²³ By putting not the texts, but the practices of subaltern people front and center in the study of the Bible as scripture—"by describing their ways of reading their scriptures"—Wimbush's project of "signifying on the Bible as scripture" opens up "the possibility of overhearing a people's *work* with the Scripture as precious evidence for understanding the textures of their cultures."¹²⁴

Wimbush uses the term *text* to identify the articulate public manifestation of some cultural construction made available for others to experience. Songs, sermons, novels, rituals, dances, postures, gestures, speeches, proposals—all are "texts" that can be "read" to "explore" the "texture" of a people's social cohesion and culture. . . . "All peoples have texts. All peoples signify." This means that texts are not add-ons to a people's social structures and practical productions. They are not ornamental, nor are they merely secondary attempts to explain this or that feature of a people's culture. They are part and parcel of the structure itself. They are a fundamental ingredient of a dynamic process in the work of living together. Texts belong to the texture of a people. They generate structures and are generated by structures. Their importance . . . is that they partake of the magic of human discourse, the public articulation of a people's self-understanding as a society, their texture publicly expressed as a text. Without texts to register discourse we would not be able to think together about any common project or understand those of others. By calling the Bible "scriptures" and scriptures "texts," and by characterizing the work of discourse as signifying texts, Wimbush has proposed a theory of cultural formation.¹²⁵

Mack's assessment of the Institute's project of signifying (on) scriptures may serve as a fitting conclusion to his own scholarly labors. Mack has been working primarily with Christian origins, with "different moments of social situation and mythmaking" from Wimbush. Mack's analysis of "the making of the Bible as the foundational myth for Western Christian culture," he writes, has resulted in a "critique of the standard imagination of Christian beginnings, one that views Christian origins as miraculous, exceptional, and incomparable instead of as a product of human invention and social interests." His own "project" has therefore "required a redescription of Christian beginnings as human mythmaking in the interest of social formations that were understandable responses to the social histories and circumstances of the time." Underlying

123. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 107–8, 116, 126–27, adding: "For Wimbush, empowerment . . . refers to an awareness of an African American culture, that this culture is profoundly humanizing, that it has a distinctive history of critical intellectual activity, that it has cultivated a human ideal of remarkable character and ethic, and that it has the potential to dismantle the walls of separation and discrimination that keep us from laying the foundations for a common good society" (p. 117; cf. 14, 123, 130–31, 135–36).

124. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 115, 116, emphasis original.

125. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 22, emphasis original.

Mack's project are two basic concerns. First, "to discover the human reasons and social logics involved in the early Christian mythmaking of the gospels and the Bible." Second, "to analyze those reasons and that social logic from the perspective of our current world of many nations and [to] register a critique of the culture of Christian myth and mentality that has always left others out of the Christian world." Mack's "method" of analysis has been "to explore the 'mythic grammar' of Christian mentality in order to describe its limitations for dealing with other peoples in our modern world."¹²⁶ And so, in affirming the significance of the Institute's work, with its potential to contribute to a critique of culture,¹²⁷ and in translating the concept of "signifying" and "scriptures" into his own categories (of *myth* and *mythmaking*),¹²⁸ Mack continues his lifelong commitment to the academy: situating the social-historical study of the NT and Christian beginnings within the academic enterprise of religion; challenging the study of religion to contribute to public discourse and debate, as a participant in comparative cultural criticism; and producing scholarship that recognizes and embraces the principle of difference, celebrates the human labor of sense- and mythmaking, and challenges our best efforts to understand our changing world and dare to imagine a future—together.¹²⁹

126. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 7–8, adding: Wimbush, on the other hand, recognizes "the way the Bible actually works in the modern world among peoples viewed by the dominant culture as inferior. This involves a reading of the Bible that is different both from the standard Christian practices and from [Mack's] own description of Christian cultural mentality. From the perspective of oppressed peoples, the traditional interpretation of the Bible by Euro-American Christians in support of their dominant culture, as well as the underlying social logic of the overarching Christian myth, has been seen as problematic by peoples marginalized by that culture." Wimbush understands that "African Americans [have] not accepted the Euro-American reading of the Bible because they were fully aware of the disparities between the Bible stories and the Christian interpretations of those stories, as well as the dissimulations involved when those stories were used to sanction social patterns of behavior that subjugated other peoples. In [Mack's] project, the mythic grammar of the Bible could no longer be accepted without a revision of the myth if we wanted to address the social imbalances created by that grammar. Wimbush's project reveals that such revisions are actually being produced all the time at the popular level of lived experience and cultural discourse among oppressed peoples. This means that an African American intellectual tradition has been at work on the construction of a new (biblical) 'text' or (cultural) 'script' in keeping with the texture of the people's own ethnic identity" (p. 8).

127. For Mack, this means "delv[ing] into the myths and mentalities at work in different cultures in order to analyze their social logics and explain their mythic grammars" ("Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 135).

128. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 13, 14, 31, 136. "Signifying is not meaningless," Mack writes, "but accepts that, in life, meaning is always to be sought somewhere between truth and understanding" (p. 105).

129. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Christianity Seminar of the Westar Institute, spring meeting, Santa Rosa, CA, March 2016.

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Where We Go Next—Big Questions for the Big Picture

A Response to Burton Mack, and Reflections on the Future of the Christianity Seminar

Maia Kotrosits

Burton Mack's place in the work of the Christianity Seminar is both massive and implicit. So many of his fundamental contributions are or have become our pre-suppositions, not the least of which is an approach to NT and affiliated literature that reads those texts as responses to their messy and regularly disorienting social world, as responses to social ideals and the collapse of those ideals. In fact, some of the Christianity Seminar's most basic goals are indebted on some level to Mack: to rethink the first–third centuries without highly romantic notions of origins or the great acts of men; to focus our attention more creatively and critically on the relationship of “early Christian” literature to the social forces and cultural histories of the ancient Mediterranean; to make each element of what we call “early Christianity” historically explicable without recourse to theological exceptionalism.

On an even deeper level, the fact that we gather under the blustery presumption of re-thinking the entirety of the first–third centuries reveals us to be swept up in the promises of what we have been calling the “big picture” narrative of that period, a task which has been thoroughly defined—or re-defined—by Mack. (What the promises of the big picture seem to be, and whether we can deliver on them, is a question I will entertain further on.)

Given the ways in which we take Mack's influence on our goals and frameworks for granted, I thought this might be a good occasion for re-centering us. That is, I want to use the occasion not just to honor the efficacy and impact of Mack's work, nor even to heed the shadow Mack casts over us. Instead, I want to leverage Mack's repeated themes and his specific historical and ideological commitments to clarify what it is we think we might be doing here and what we anticipate the effects of our work to be. That is to say that I hope Mack's very distinct and unabashed perspective on the work of history—how to do it, why it matters—will nudge us into being just as distinct and unabashed about our historical modes and motivations.

In what follows, I will focus us on five defining aspects of Mack's work: (1) myth-making, demythologization, and the social; (2) relationships between texts and social phenomena; (3) culture collision, critique, and creativity in the

mess; (4) the U.S. political landscape; and, (5) sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures.

Myth-making, Demythologization, and the Social

The term “myth” and the social production and circulation of mythologies are perhaps the most defining characteristics of Mack’s work. In his *Myth of Innocence*, he suggests that the Gospel of Mark provides a myth of origins for Christianity, one founded (defensively) on a sense of singular irreproachability and innocence.¹ Paul constructs/builds upon a “Christ myth” as illustrated in the kerygma.² Ben Sira’s hymn is a myth that lends divine intention to social structures.³ Biblical scholars and U.S. culture are not only captivated by the “myth of the Bible,” but recapitulate Christian myth-making in myriad ways.⁴ The task of the historian then is demystification, offering a material context for such mythic imaginations, and doing so with a clear-eyed empiricism and fully secular set of investments.

The Seminar has not often engaged the language of myth-making explicitly, in part because many of us question the presumptions of unity and essence implied by Mack’s models—“the Christian myth,” “the myth of the Bible,” or even a distinctive notion of Christian/Christianity at all. But we might observe that the primary object of our own demythologizing has been the “master story” of early Christianity as a distinct phenomenon with a single trajectory from Jesus through the apostles, on to orthodoxy and then Constantine. On the heels of the Acts seminar, which not only places Acts well into the second century but also reads it as a myth of origins unfortunately naturalized by NT scholarship, the Christianity Seminar has repeatedly sought ways to intervene in theological assumptions about Christian history that support exceptionalist or even simply teleological historical narratives. Two of our primary historical myths have been martyrdom and Gnosticism, for example, which are at heart narratives of persecution/righteousness and orthodoxy/coherence respectively.

Despite the fact that “empirical” historical data has been repeatedly “instrumentalized” to extend the “Christian myth,”⁵ Mack still holds that there is a difference between history and myth, and he sees his work as fully part of the former. But I would like to call attention to the fact that any project of demythologization with Bultmann in its direct lineage will need to reckon with the ways that demystifying project was still a thoroughly theological one, one

1. Mack *A Myth of Innocence*.

2. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, chapters 3 and 4. Mack, “Re-reading the Christ Myth: Paul’s Gospel and the Christ Cult Question,” in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*.

3. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*.

4. See *A Myth of Innocence*, Introduction and Conclusion; Mack, *The Lost Gospel*; Mack, *The Christian Myth*.

5. *A Myth of Innocence*, Introduction.

which sought to translate NT discourses and symbols into immanently meaningful ones for people of a different age.⁶ So, to what extent do we still see ourselves as part of the imperative toward a secularized history, and how does that intersect with the work of those of us in the Seminar that seek a (deconstructed, modest) set of theological possibilities? I use “theological” here not necessarily to indicate waxing on the existence of a god, but rather to indicate a set of tools or results that actively engage making sense of the present, whether that sense-making makes recourse to a god or not. God regularly acts as a stand-in for all kinds of narrative impulses around history and questions of meaning anyway. God’s main function, I would dare to say, has been as a narrative device: giving significance, telos, and coherence to the vast and variegated space, the chaos, of experience.

Considering god’s narrative functions and the implicit theological impulses of even histories that use secular/empirical methodologies and tools might push us to ask some questions about the past and future of Westar itself. Should we understand Westar’s legacy within biblical scholarship as a secularized one, and if so, to what extent do we need to be loyal to that legacy? Again, and just to put all my cards on the table, as so much recent scholarship on the invention of the secular has shown⁷ and as Mack’s own work has demonstrated, the secular has consistently been the language in which not just cultural but theological and/or existential assumptions naturalize themselves anyway. Mack’s “Christian myth,” for all the Christian fantasies of coherence, inventiveness, and distinctness it extends, is a prime example of the ways that attempting to divest ourselves from theological narratives does not mean we are not also used by them. History itself is myth-making, and so how might we *scrutinize as well as constructively engage* the inevitability of our mythological enterprise? In this we might also ask to what extent the parallel processes of the God Seminar and the Christianity Seminar might speak to each other, even while respecting their separate modes of expression and horizons of possibility.

I want to push us to find ways to honor the tools and methods of the discipline, and perhaps even increase the rigor of our investment in them, without any kind of deep faith in empirical disinterestedness or bowing to the presumption of secularism. That is, if history is myth-making, the goal is not necessarily to reconstruct the most impartial picture of the ancient world, but rather to make one that helps us name this moment most precisely and effectively and—not insignificantly—to relativize ourselves most thoroughly. That is, we have to resist the urge to collapse the present and the past, even while they cannot be reliably differentiated. Thus historical “relativization” does not simply mean increasing the rigor of our investment in the tools of the discipline, but doing

6. See, e.g., Bultmann, “Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung (1941).”

7. See especially Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, and Pellegrini and Jakobsen, *Secularisms*.

so in order to be in almost devastatingly close touch with our desires for what we want, and cannot have, out of history.

Relationships between Texts and Social Phenomena

Mack's recasting of "early Christian" literature as fully explicable in social terms is packaged in schemas in which texts are associated with distinct groups with contrasting ideals and responses to basically the same broader social factors in the ancient Mediterranean. For Mack then, this literature presents us with a picture of a "diverse" Christian constituency, and each individual text gives us a portrait of a community with distinct, often incongruous positions and socio-theological takes on the same set of Judean and Hellenistic traditions. Mack also continually highlights the social creativity or innovation of texts, even if that innovation had ominous implications. He often uses the words "genius," "inventive," or "novel," when describing ancient Christian notions or practices. These texts represent collective social experiments, collective rationalizations for social practices, and/or an articulation of social ideals.

The implication is that while the landscape of "early Christian" literature is full of variety, texts often come to represent coherent sets of communities with shared positions—a collective caught in a miniature *Zeitgeist*.⁸ We might ask to what extent this has been our default assumption. But more than that, we might engage the question of on what planes we are seeking/expecting similarity and difference. One question I have been preoccupied with is how do we capture the rich textural difference between texts without assuming deep ideological differentiation is what is at stake in those differences? While I do not think we should be naïve about competition between groups or figures, treating them as positions is already inherently an orthodoxy/heresy model.⁹ This model is limited by being a time specific development (and not a universal one at that), but I would caution us from taking that model at face value even when it does operate. How does the rhetoric of groups or figures at odds with each other cover over—or even assume—close, collaborative/elaborative, overlapping relationships between texts or people? Do differences need to presume friction (and negative friction at that)? To paraphrase something Karen King has said, what differences make a difference—and to whom? Importantly, how can we characterize close, overlapping, and elaborative relationships between texts and/or figures *without defaulting back into a picture of a unitary or coherent single phenomenon*? I propose that this will require us not just to break down our categories, but to pay attention to textual and social affiliations that do not fit our

8. See Stanley Stowers' critique of this assumption in "Kinds of Myth, Meals, and Power: Paul's Gospel and the Christ Cult Question," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*.

9. As Stowers suggests, albeit with respect to the over-reading of "internal" community differences between Paul and the Corinthians. Stowers, "Kinds of Myth," 107.

stereotypical categorizations, to see those affiliations as standard practices and yet not indicative of some sort of essential or elemental affinity.

Culture Collision, Critique, and Creativity in the Mess

One of the aspects of Mack's work that I find not only most fruitful but, frankly, most poignant, is the picture he paints of ancient people in the crosshairs of various cultural forces, brokering between fragments of histories and traditions they call their own and doing so in surprising ways in the motley mix of the Mediterranean.¹⁰ What if we gave this sensibility more due?

While Mack generally considers the advent of the Roman empire as a clunky development with mainly structural (and not quite formative) implications, I do think that a sophisticated understanding of politics, agency, and constraint emerges between the lines, and we might take some cues from it. While the ancient Mediterranean may or may not have been qualitatively more confusing or fragmented or messy than any other historical moment, the very attention to the ways people are enamored with ideals and haunted by the failure of those ideals—the ways they are driven by a need to make sense of the forces coursing through them, forces for which the people themselves are ultimately only minor or incidental subjects—is for me one of the most finely-gauged, and experientially true, implications of Mack's "big picture."

Mack's ancient people have bombastic fantasies, deep disappointments, ridiculous expectations, and invigorating encounters. They thus cut through those persistent (and ultimately unhelpful) binaries of assimilation and resistance to which so much of the discipline is currently attached. Assimilation and resistance are not only nonsensical as oppositions but represent worry and fantasy more than material practices and lived experience. Pure resistance is a romance, and assimilation of dominant cultural elements (admitted or not) is simply a fact, and one that does not preclude critique or disillusionment. The whole breadth of postcolonial literature, even at its most sanguine, treats subjectivity and agency as deeply ironic—sovereignty only occurs with recognition, agency is forever tied into dominant frameworks.¹¹ We might occasionally be befuddled by the contradictory social or political signals emanating from a text, but that has more to do with the general impossibility of ever fully distinguishing between the powers one might support and those one might oppose (to paraphrase Judith Butler). We need simply to ask different questions about power and its implications. Mack's emphasis on creative cultural productions accommodates ambivalence and volatile political potentialities, but focuses

10. See especially his first vivid chapter of *Who Wrote the New Testament?*

11. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" or Mannur and Braziel, eds., "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora*; Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity"; Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

more on how ancient people are trying to live caught between pressures, how they are trying to live in their world — and, perhaps surprisingly, how they feel about it.

While we do not need to (and should not) straightforwardly assume Mack's model of Hellenism and Judean traditions as separable and antagonistic elements more/less simply housed under a Roman umbrella, we might ask whether recent biblical scholarship has (or we have) been so fixated on the question of Roman imperial domination that we do not attend enough to the older slivers of histories or traditions that strangely persist or travel through time, ones that take on complex new lives and get integrated, sometimes awkwardly, into later cultural moments. It might be that we need a more diachronic approach (to resuscitate that old language) to the first–third centuries themselves. Indeed, thinking of any given historical “moment” as composed of many other concurrent moments, as containing ghosts and shells and footprints of pasts, might help us be a little less generalizing about the extent to which Rome is the implicit target or even most significant determinant for a given text or set of social ideals. But again, how might we do this without collapsing into the naivety of some former NT scholarship in which Rome figures as benign presence at most? To pull all of these considerations together: how do we incorporate the empire-critical and postcolonial insights of the last decades of biblical scholarship into a wider set of critical and historical considerations so as to do justice not only to the complexity of lives under empire or colonialism, but also to the thick and multi-textured topography of the first–third centuries?

The U.S. Political Landscape

We must observe that by now Mack has turned his attention away from ancient historical description and towards the legacies of Christianity in U.S. politics and culture. In his paper for this session, he ups the ante for us and proposes that the primary and explicit intervention of biblical scholarship should be to “come to speech about the Bible as the myth that underlies Western culture, the culture that is now in trouble. Biblical scholarship should be able to extract and analyze the Bible's epic mythology for description as a social logic.”

Mack is right to notice “Western culture,” or more specifically American culture, is in trouble. And I share his sense of urgency and desire to shape public discourse. We are of course a scholarly institution for the public, and one in the U.S., and I have suggested above that we take making sense of the present in substantive and rigorous ways as central to our work. That includes being conscious again and again about the ways capitalism, modern histories of land usurpation and enslavement, police violence and the disciplinary state, sexual violence and rape culture, among other things, might offer us analogues or otherwise inform our work. But do we, should we, think of ourselves on a mission to save? Would not a failure of Western culture, according to Mack's logic, be

the rightful failure of the Christian or biblical myth? Evangelizing implications of this notion to save aside, I want to say that however explicitly or implicitly we end up trying to intervene in U.S. cultural self-understanding, we take as our basic assumption that the U.S. and Western culture as we know it is going down, and probably not as quickly as we hope or fear. Given the place of the Bible and Christianity in U.S. nation-building, though, it would be ironic not only to try to save the U.S. from the mess it has created, but to make a history of Christianity, however deconstructed or *avant garde*, as part of the redress. In other words, let us not take ourselves to be heroes.

I would also like to suggest that, even as we critique biblical discourses and biblical culture as problematic and as instruments of more than occasional destruction, a re-written history of the first–third centuries might be useful for getting perspective—for taking stock of the moment in all its fullness and destruction. It could possibly help diagnose what is wrong and what to do about it, but I suspect we already know a lot of the things that are wrong and already have a lot of ideas about what to do about it. Perhaps the portraits or stories we produce, in their very historical specificity, might instead be ground for considering how people live when they are, for example, expecting things to end, or for considering how people gauge their own significance when things around them keep falling apart, or for considering how people manage to cultivate connection, pleasure, and joy even when they know things have gone terribly awry. I think you probably get my drift.

Sweeping Conceptualities and Provocative Gestures

Finally, I want to address the bigness of Mack’s big picture—a bigness that materializes in its temporal sweep, the ostentatiousness of its tone, and the sheer amount of intellectual labor poured into it. In the paper for this seminar, Mack proposes that scholars of the Bible and early Christianity are at a juncture in which we are endangered by our own lack of a sense of relevance, and the only redress is through getting outside of the usual scholarly comfort zones:

Discourse at the public level is, of course, quite different from talking to ourselves inside the boundaries of an academic club. But since the guild is in the process of losing its traditional audiences in the churches and academies, anyway, its attempts at finding a responsible and reasonable role for its investments and labor is not much different than all of the other social interests and traditional intellectual projects that now find themselves at the limits of their orders wondering what to do next. So why not put our learning out there in the intellectual marketplace where social unrest and cultural criticism are now providing the topics for public discourse? We might have to learn a few new rhetorical ruses to get the attention of intellectuals in other fields.¹²

12. Mack, “The Quest for Christian Origins,” xxx (see in this issue of the *Forum*).

Sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures are native to the institute that housed the Jesus Seminar—a group whose work managed to catch wide public and scholarly attention and whose work still manages to live on in public and scholarly consciousness with some ambivalence, perhaps even over-determining to some extent this Seminar's work. In fact, in the cases of both Mack and the work of the Jesus Seminar, those sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures have indelibly altered the landscape of thought regarding "early Christianity," have made an almost unprecedented number of historical and historiographical contributions. But one might also note that the biggest, most provocative gestures—the red-lettered voice of the historical Jesus, the diagnosis of a "Christian myth"—have also drawn the most critique, and not simply because they upset people's delicate constitutions or break taboos (which they of course did). It is also that they are not quite right. They are indeed "ruses," coarse concepts and too-easy captures of complex historical and historiographical knots, ones that are dead-on diagnoses of *something* (collective dissatisfaction, desire for the real), but that something is not the truth of history, even though that is the currency in which both of these projects trade. And, importantly, both the historical Jesus project and the unveiling of the Christian myth at the heart of Western culture aim themselves at certain over-simple forms of piety. This is a huge part of their success and their power, but also a very specific framework in which to operate.

These are the risks of sweeping concepts and provocative gestures. These risks are not small, and we will have to decide how necessary they are—or at least when they are necessary. And as we entertain the question of how we address "the public" in our work, I would suggest that there is no such thing as "the public," there are only many kinds of publics, and we are going to have to decide *which* publics we want to engage, because if that choice remains implicit, our work will very likely follow a trajectory already carved out by market-research assumptions and Pew Research Center polls, limited paradigms for understanding collectives to say the least.

But I also want to underline Mack's provocation that we "get interdisciplinary," so to speak, in our own "big picture" and to be savvy about the intellectual marketplace. What will be our ruse? I am not sure we need to be a lot more specific than a "re-writing of the history of early Christianity," but that is because the writing of a history of "early Christianity" was always a ruse itself—a forceful, encapsulating rhetorical device that did not show itself to be one. Indeed, it is the excessive damage of this very sweeping conceptuality and provocative gesture—this myth—to which we are addressing ourselves now. I hope that chastens us a bit, not to prevent us from making sweeping conceptualities or provocative gestures at all, obviously, but to remind us that the stakes are high, that spectacular wrongness is inevitable, and that the mode in which we execute this larger project of ours on a public stage matters immensely. Perhaps, I hope most that it reminds us that the real value of the very big, very wrong picture

lies elsewhere than in what it proclaims to be, and it will have to trade on something more than historical veracity.

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In the Beginning Was the House¹

Part One: How Social and Identity Formation of Early Christian Groups Took Place

Dennis E. Smith[†]

Introduction

If we are to attempt a thick description of first- and second-century Christ group social and identity formation, we must take seriously the importance of the context, that is, the physical space in which that formation took place. Indeed, before we can correctly analyze any text, concept, or theology we need to account for the physical space in which it was born and nurtured. Too often we interpret our data as if it existed only as a set of ideas or as if it was manifest in some version of “church” as we know it today. In fact, physical space is more often than not a determinative factor of meaning.

I propose that the physical space where early Christ groups were formed was the ancient house. The house is the primary, if not the only, named assembly space for Christ groups in the NT. The house was the determinative social environment for what they became. It was never viewed as a temporary meeting place until they could build a proper church, since church buildings did not yet exist, either physically or conceptually. The house was synonymous with their identity as Christ followers. They had fully adapted to and were fully embedded in the social environment of the house.

Archaeological Data²

Interpreting the house as a social environment begins with the archaeological data. The spectacular remains of Roman period houses in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ephesus offer a rich collection of such data. Unfortunately, however, surveying this data is like viewing an episode of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” The archaeological remains are dominated by houses of the elites. Wealthy houses dominate the archaeological data because mansions survive better than hovels. Early Christ groups, however, did not come from

1. With apologies to Hal Taussig who wrote the seminal study *In the Beginning Was the Meal*.

2. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in “The House Church as Social Environment” and “Hospitality, the House Church, and Early Christian Identity.”

the elite class (more on that below). The houses in which they would have met would have been dwellings at the lower end of the spectrum.

Nevertheless there were some characteristics shared in common in all ancient houses. The most important was that, regardless of the size of the house and the social level of the householder, when guests were entertained it was in a dining space where a small group (ca. nine to fifteen) could recline together and enjoy a formal meal.

The Triclinium

The classic Roman style dining room was the *triclinium*. The example below shows a *triclinium* design on a mosaic floor from a Roman villa (Figure 1). The design indicates where the couches were to be placed. The term "*triclinium*" refers to a three-couch arrangement, typically in a "Π" shape.³

In the classic *triclinium* design each couch was expected to hold at least three diners, with nine diners being the normal expected capacity (Figure 2). The diners reclined on their left elbows with their feet extended toward the wall at an oblique angle.



Figure 1



Figure 2

3. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 38–43.



Figure 3

An example of this style of dining room *in situ* is found in a Roman house in Ephesus.⁴ This dining room is prominently located off of the courtyard and, in its later phase, included a mosaic floor that indicated the placement of the couches. Figure 3 shows the room populated with eight diners so as to provide the scale (keep in mind that diners in this room would have originally reclined on couches). The walls in the room are also decorated, a feature that is regularly found in dining rooms of the elite class in the Roman period.

Another way in which a *triclinium* might be designed was by building permanent couches for the diners in the form of masonry platforms on which cushioning would be placed for the recliners. An excellent example was found in Ostia in a “clubhouse” of the association of the builders. Here there were several dining rooms extending off of a central courtyard, some of which had permanent couch platforms. In the Figure 4 example, the sides of the *triclinium*



Figure 4

4. Krinzing, *Hanghaus 2*, 492–95 (mosaic description by Veronika Scheibelreiter). The room measures 5.35 m west wall, 5.54 m east wall, 6.18 m south wall, and 6.31 m north wall (p. 405).

were extended to make room for more diners than the classic nine. Dunbabin posits that the room could have accommodated twelve or more.⁵

The classic *triclinium* design tended to be the preferred style and size for dining in a variety of settings. An example is found at the imperial resort at Sperlonga, which dates from the time of Tiberius. Here guests of the emperor were provided with a spectacular statuary presentation of scenes from the *Odyssey* arranged at the entrance of a large cave. The guests would view the spectacle only nine at a time, however, from the position of an outdoor *triclinium* that faced the cave (Figure 5).

A variation of the *triclinium* was the "*biclinium*," in which the center couch was omitted. This example from Pompeii shows a *biclinium* constructed for garden dining (Figure 6).



Figure 5



Figure 6

5. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 97–98.



Figure 7

The *biclinium* was also the standard design for mithraea. An example is the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia (Figure 7). In the standard design of a mithraeum, the central position opposite the entrance and the focus of the hall, was occupied by the cult image of Mithras slaying the bull.

Biclinia were also commonly provided for funerary banquets at family tombs in Ostia, as illustrated in Figure 8.



Figure 8

The Stibadium

Another style of couch design in the Roman period was the *stibadium*. By the fourth century CE, it had become the normative pattern for reclining banquets.⁶ A third-century mosaic located on the dining room floor of a house from Sepphoris pictures a *stibadium* arrangement (Figure 9). Note that the image shows four reclining diners, although it appears there is room for more.⁷

The *stibadium* is the form of dining arrangement most commonly pictured in the Christian catacombs in Rome. The fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla (Figure 10) shows seven reclining diners. The table contains a chalice, a plate of



Figure 9



Figure 10

6. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 6, 169–74.

7. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 166, plate XII; 169–74.



Figure 11

fish, and baskets of bread. It pictures what may be a funerary banquet with possible echoes of NT references, especially John 21:9–14, a meal of fish and bread prepared by the risen Lord and served to seven of the disciples (21:2).

A simple form of *stibadium* arrangement is illustrated in a wall painting from an Augustan period (first century BCE) columbarium burial chamber in Rome (Figure 11). It appears to be made up of a set of cushions arranged on the floor. This style could easily be set up in the modest housing characteristic of Christ group gatherings. It is a style that required no furniture and could be set up in any space that could be adapted for dining.

The Emergence of Church Buildings

When did church buildings begin to appear? The first standardized Christian church buildings took the form of the basilica, which began to appear in the late third to early fourth centuries CE. Basilicas functioned in Roman architecture as centers of governmental administration and expressions of imperial power. Michael White has traced the development from the house gathering to the basilica. He rejects earlier studies that posit a single line of development from house to basilica. Rather he argues that the Christian basilica was an adaptation of the imperial basilica and represented the phase in which Christianity moved from a private cult to a state religion. He emphasizes that the house church within a private dwelling and centering on the dining room was the norm for most Christ groups for the first three centuries of Christian origins. That is to say, there was no specifically “Christian” architecture during this period.⁸

Concurrent with the emergence of church buildings were changes in the central liturgy. That is to say, the change from a dining room setting to an assembly hall setting tended to take place concurrent with the change from a full meal to

8. White, *Building God’s House*, 11–25.

a token meal, namely the Eucharist, in which only a symbolic portion of bread and wine would be ingested.⁹

The Banquet

Formal meals in the ancient Mediterranean world were reclining banquets that followed a ritual order as defined in the culture. The focus was on the sharing of food, wine, and conversation in such a form that social bonding or community formation took place. Plutarch called it the “friend-making character of the dining table.”¹⁰ Within the banquet community, social equality among the diners was assumed, but in practice it was often in tension with an emphasis on honoring the status stratification of the diners.¹¹ Those who bonded at the dinner table also took on an ethical responsibility toward the group as a whole, a phenomenon I call social obligation.¹² Because the meals of the Christ groups are communal and assumed to have significance, they are not ordinary meals but rather formal meals or banquets. Therefore they should be analyzed according to the banquet model.¹³

How Large Would a House Gathering Be?

The normative number of diners in a *triclinium* dining room setting was nine, although on occasion up to twelve or fifteen might be squeezed together in the reclining space. Images of *stibadium* meals often picture smaller groups of diners, but not exclusively so; *stibadium* dining arrangements for nine to twelve diners are also evidenced. The size of the dining group was important to the social function of the formal meal; it was intended to be an occasion when all of the diners would interact together in a social bonding experience.

Some wealthy elites gave large elaborate dinners as a way to impress their guests, but such gatherings were heavily criticized by Roman moralists for being contrary to the social purpose of the dinner gathering.¹⁴ A good example of

9. White, *Building God's House*, 119–20; “Regulating Fellowship,” 180–81, 195–97.

10. *Quaestiones convivales* 612D–E; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 9–10, 54–55.

11. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 10–12, 55–58.

12. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 10.

13. See also Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft*; Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*.

14. See, e.g., Plutarch *Quaestiones convivales* 679A–B: “If both space and the provisions are ample, we must still avoid great numbers, because they in themselves take away the pleasure of conversation. It is worse to take away the pleasure of conversation at table than to run out of wine. . . . People who bring together too many guests to one place do prevent general conversation; they allow only a few to enjoy each other’s society, for the guests separate into groups of two or three in order to meet and converse, completely unconscious of those whose place on the couches is remote and not looking their way because they are separated from them by practically the length of a race course. . . . So it is a mistake for the wealthy to build showy dining rooms that hold thirty couches or more. Such magnificence makes for unsocial and unfriendly banquets where the manager of a fair is needed more than a toastmaster.”

the importance of the normal *triclinium* arrangement for nine diners is shown in Figure 5 above. The Sperlonga villa of Emperor Tiberius spared no expense in creating a theatrical experience in a coastal grotto, but confined the guest list to nine diners at a time in accordance with the cultural expectations of a properly conducted banquet.

The default norm for Christ-group gatherings, therefore, would be a maximum of nine to fifteen diners. The modest houses in which they met would have limited the size of the gathering. But even more important was the purpose of the gathering, namely, that it functioned as a ritual of social formation. Accordingly, it was essential that the gathering maintain the standard size for the social intercourse that was central to the banquet experience. This was not a rule, it was social convention; it was the way the banquet worked its magic. If the size of a gathering grew too large, then another house gathering would be formed. That is why there were multiple house gatherings of Christ groups in various urban locations.

Associations

Kloppenborg and Ascough define associations in this way:

Life in Greek and Roman cities and towns was organized around two poles, the *polis* or town and the family. . . . Between poles of the family and the *polis* there existed a large number of more or less permanent private associations, guilds, or clubs, organized around an extended family, the cult of a deity or hero, an ethnic group in diaspora, a neighborhood, or a common trade or profession. Most of the associations had cultic aspects and most served broadly social goals.¹⁵

Note especially the emphasis of some associations to organize around family groups and/or around the cult of a deity or hero. The “broadly social goals” of associations included especially an emphasis on gathering for formal meals (see Figure 4 above).¹⁶ Actually, there was little if any separation between “social goals” and cultic practices, since the ancients did not distinguish between secular and sacred.

Associations occurred throughout the Mediterranean world over a period of several centuries, from as early as the sixth century BCE to the late Roman period. They are known to us primarily by means of inscriptions or papyri that contain such items as decrees honoring members or benefactors, dedications to their deities or patrons, and by-laws defining responsibilities and conduct of members at their meetings.¹⁷

Associations wrote the book on group gatherings. Christ groups did not have to invent a new form of gathering; they simply followed the association model. In fact, it is misleading to think of Christ groups as having an identity

15. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 1.

16. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 87–131.

17. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 3–4.

separate from the association model. They did not imitate associations; they *were* an association.

The Hospitality Motif

There are two well-known exemplars for the hospitality motif in Mediterranean culture.

1. Abraham and Sarah at the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18–19). Synopsis: Abraham sees three strangers approaching his tent. He runs out to offer them hospitality. “My lord,” he says, “if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves (i.e. recline) under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on.” Then he and Sarah prepare the finest bread and the most succulent calf that they have, and Abraham himself serves it to the guests. His guests then reveal to him that they are divine beings disguised as ordinary strangers. In return for his hospitality, they bestow a divine gift, the promise of a son to be born to Sarah. Then they move on to the next villages, Sodom and Gomorrah, and test their hospitality. Sodom and Gomorrah fail miserably and are punished for their inhospitality.

2. Baucis and Philemon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8). Synopsis: Baucis and Philemon are an elderly couple who live a simple life in a small hut. One day two strangers knock at their door asking for hospitality. Being pious people, the couple invite the strangers in and share with them all that they have, meager though it is. They soon find that these are no ordinary strangers but rather gods disguised as mortals. They have just entertained Zeus and Hermes. As a reward for their hospitality, the gods promise the couple whatever gift they may choose, while the rest of the village lies destroyed in a flood, because no one there would offer hospitality to these strangers.

Notice the components of the basic story:

1. Divine beings disguised as strangers test the piety of mortals in offering hospitality to strangers. Those who do so are rewarded. Those who do not are punished with immediate destruction.
2. The stranger is the archetypal “other,” generally someone who is from a distant land and/or another culture. Hospitality is shown here to be embedded in Mediterranean culture as a ritual means for resolving tension with the displaced “other” by peaceful rather than violent means.
3. Hospitality is signified by hosting a meal in which the stranger is treated as guest of honor and is feted with the finest that the host has to offer. The primary theme of the motif emphasizes relationship with the “other” as offered through table fellowship.

The hospitality motif is referenced frequently in the NT. Hebrews 13:2 makes it into a command: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Note that the

generic reference to “some” indicates that many such stories were known to the author. The Abraham story is referenced directly at several points in the gospels, most notably in the Q text in which Jesus instructs the disciples before he sends them out on an itinerant mission: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town” (Matt 10:14–15; see also Luke 10:10–12). The story is referenced indirectly in those texts where the divine personage appears in disguise and in need of hospitality; see, for example, Matthew 25 (the sheep and the goats) and Luke 24:13–35 (the road to Emmaus).

In the Beginning Was the House

Part Two: The Exegetical Data

Dennis E. Smith[†]

What happens when we filter our data through the context of the house as gathering space? I will illustrate this point by presenting below in-depth studies of three phases of Christ group development as evidenced in selected NT texts.

Profile of a Pauline Community (40s to 50s CE)¹

House Gatherings

The Pauline *ekklēsiai* met in houses. The primary social network bringing together their membership appears to have been household connections. In Corinth household groups included Chloe's household (1 Cor 1:11), the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15), and a gathering at Gaius' house (Rom 16:23). It is also likely that Erastus hosted a gathering at Corinth (Rom 16:23) and that Phoebe hosted a gathering at Kenchreai (Rom 16:1–2). Prisca and Aquila hosted gatherings at their house in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19) and later in Rome (Rom 16:3–4). Philemon hosted a gathering at his house (Phlm 2). In Rome, Paul singles out several different household gatherings, including those associated with (1) Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3–4) as well as (2) "the family of Aristobulus" (16:10), (3) "the family of Narcissus" (16:11), (4) "the brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*) who are with them [Asyncritus, etc.]" (16:14), and (5) "all the saints (*hagioi*) who are with them [Philologus, etc.]" (16:15).²

More specifically, those gatherings took place in a room that had been furnished to accommodate a reclining meal, following the cultural model for house gatherings.³ Accordingly, Paul consistently identifies meals as a formative

1. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in "Revisiting Associations and Christ Groups."

2. See Lampe, who proposes up to seven different household gatherings based on the greetings in Romans 16 (*From Paul to Valentinus*, 359, 374–76, 379–80).

3. Paul's letters do not designate the specific dining posture since reclining was an expected cultural model for all formal meals of significance. However, in 1 Cor 14:30 the text reads: "If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby (*kathēmai*), let the first person be silent." In *From Symposium to Eucharist*, I interpreted this text to mean that the 1 Corinthians community had decided to sit at their meal (p. 178). I have now changed my mind. Following the model laid out in this paper in which reclining was the necessary norm, I would now interpret this text to mean "even if a revelation is made to someone else *who is sitting rather than reclining* [and thus is of a lower status in the group], let the first person be silent."

activity in a variety of locations, including Antioch (Gal 2:11–14), Corinth (1 Corinthians 11–14), and Rome (Romans 14–15).

Demographics

Steve Friesen has proposed that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the Roman empire were non-elites, primarily existing at a subsistence level. This would be the pool from which were drawn the membership of the Pauline communities.⁴ There was some level of social stratification, since some of their number needed to be householders in order to provide the houses in which they would meet. Paul characterized the majority of the Corinthian community as lacking learning, prominence, or status in society at large (1 Cor 1:26). The household itself was normally governed by the household codes that governed relationships between members of the household (husbands/wives, parents/children, masters/slaves). Paul attempted to subvert these codes by proclaiming that “in Christ . . . there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28). But after his death they were quickly reinstated in the late first and early second centuries CE (Col 3:18–4:1, Eph 5:21–6:9, Titus 2:1–10; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7). Paul’s circle included women in benefactor and leadership roles.⁵ He proclaimed the equality of slaves among the members (1 Cor 7:21–24), and in some cases slaves took on leadership roles.⁶ He even apparently urged Philemon to free his slave Onesimus (Phlm 15–16). For the most part, however, slaves seemed to have been left in limbo, so that Paul would argue that both slave and free lived under God’s grace and so, while each kept their social roles, they were nevertheless to be considered equal in some sense (1 Cor 7:21–24). Some house gatherings included Jews as well as gentiles; Paul tried various strategies to overcome tensions between them but was not always successful (e.g., Gal 2:11–14, Rom 14:1–15:13; see also 1 Corinthians 8).

The Corinthian *Ekklesia* and the Association Model

One of the earliest Christ groups we can reconstruct is the one at Corinth as described in 1 Corinthians. The self-identity of the group is expressed in Paul’s greeting at 1 Cor 1:2: *tē ekklēsia tou theou tē ousē en Korinthō, hēgiasmenois en Christō Iēsou, klētois hagiois*. The influential NRSV translation is: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus. . . .” (1 Cor 1:2). The translation of *ekklēsia* as “church” is anachronistic and misleading; there was no entity called “church” at this time. The basic meaning of *ekklēsia*

4. “Poverty in Pauline Studies.” See also Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, especially 1–4, where he distinguishes between the 0.5% who made up the elites and the 99.5% that made up the rest of the population in the Roman world.

5. See, e.g., Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2), Prisca (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5), Mary (Rom 16:6), Junia (Rom 16:7), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:12), Rufus’ mother (Rom 16:13), Julia and Olympas (Rom 16:15).

6. E.g., Erastus (Rom 16:23).

is “gathering” or “assembly.” It was also a term used as a self-identification by some associations.⁷ The difference was that as opposed to an *ekklēsia* of another hero or deity, this *ekklēsia* gathered to honor the Judean deity known simply as *theos* and the divine hero *Christos Iēsous*. So what set them apart was not the term *ekklēsia*; it was the phrase *ekklēsia tou theou* (“the gathering of [the Judean] God”).

Their “gathering” was convened at a formal meal. Paul makes this clear with the repeated use of the phrase “when you come together” (11:17), “when you come together . . . to eat . . .” (11:20, 33), “when you come together, each has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (14:26). All of their activities that we call “worship” took place while they were convened at the dinner table.

The meal they enjoyed followed the form of the Greek banquet tradition. First there was the *deipnon*, or meal proper (1 Cor 11:23–24). Then “after the *deipnon*” (11:25) they continued the evening with the *symposium*, an extended period of wine drinking accompanied by philosophical discussion or, in their case, the activities that we call “worship.” Each part of the meal was accompanied by a ritual of dedication to the Lord Jesus, first by means of shared bread (11:23–24), then, for the *symposium*, by means of a wine dedication (11:25). The sharing of bread, wine, and conversation fit the pattern of the formal meal in Greco-Roman culture. These were rituals of social bonding, as defined by Plutarch, who referred to the “friend-making character of the dining table”⁸ and attributed it to the sharing of wine and conversation, without which “gone is the aim and end of the good fellowship (*koinōnia*) of the party, and Dionysus is outraged.”⁹ Paul echoed the same idea in 10:16–17:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Members and Non-Members

How were members defined and how did they get to be members? Paul’s initial description of the members of the gathering is in 1 Cor 1:2. Here the NRSV translates the phrase *klētois hagiois* as “called to be saints,” which again is an anachronistic phrase—what could “saints” mean at this period of development? The term *klētos* is a derivative of the verb *kaleo* and meant both “invitation to a meal” and “summons” or “call.”¹⁰ Paul used the term in a number of

7. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 182; see also Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 4–5.

8. *Quaestiones convivales* 612D–E; cited above in n. 10.

9. *Quaestiones convivales* 615A. See also Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 9–10, 54–55.

10. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 549.

different contexts. For example, in 1:1 he identified himself as “called to be an apostle.” *Klētoi hagioi* may have a different nuance. *Klētoi* may be a pun and thus refer both to “meal invitation” and “call,” so that the experience of “call” resulted from the shared bread and wine described in 10:16–17. The term *hagios* means “dedicated or consecrated to the service of God.”¹¹ Therefore, my tentative translation of the phrase *klētoi hagioi* is “dedicants.” Paul also identifies the “dedicants” as part of the wider circle of “all those who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2). The location of such an invocation would be at the gathering.

The most common term for members in 1 Corinthians is *adelphoi* or “brothers and sisters” (1 Cor 1:10 *passim*). As Harland reminds us, this was also a term commonly used in other associations.¹² It is a fictive kinship term and, even though it may have had a particular theological content in the context of the Corinthian gathering, the use of the term itself does not set them apart from other associations.

Also present at the gathering were two categories of non-members. They are referenced in this text:

But if all prophesy, an *apistos* or *idiōtēs* who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the heart of the *apistos* are disclosed, that person will bow down and worship God, declaring, “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:24–25; NRSV modified).

The term *idiōtēs* is translated “outsider” by the NRSV. However, the *idiōtēs* is called upon to utter the ritual affirmation: “if you say a blessing with the spirit [i.e. speaking in a tongue], how can anyone who is in the position of an *idiōtēs* say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since the *idiōtēs* does not know what you are saying” (14:16). Therefore, such an individual must be viewed as somehow fully embedded in the ritual activities of the gathering. Danker suggests that the term refers to non-members who might have been viewed as potential members.¹³ Paul defined the *idiōtēs* as occupying a designated position at the gathering: “the one who occupies the position of the *idiōtēs*” (14:16). Danker interprets the term *topos* (“place, position”) in this text as meaning “they had a special place in the room where the Christians assembled.”¹⁴ In the context of a banquet setting, the term referred to a designated position on the *triclinium* couches, as seen, for example, in Luke 14:7–10, where *prōtoklisia* or “the highest ranking position” is contrasted with *eschatos topos* or “the last position.” What is in view is the normal ranking at table in a *triclinium* setting. There was therefore a designated position on the dining couches for an *idiōtēs*; one might assume

11. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 10.

12. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 31–33.

13. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468.

14. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468.

that it was the lowest ranking position. Danker also notes how the term was used in associations “for nonmembers who may participate in the sacrifices.”¹⁵ Although no single English translation can accurately capture all of the nuances to the term *idiōtai* in this context, I propose that it be translated “uninitiated.”

There was also a category of non-members present at the gathering who were called *apistoi*. This term is translated “unbelievers” in the NRSV, but that translation is misleading since it privileges intellectual assent. *Apistos* is the negative version of *pistos* (“faithful”), which is related to *pistis/pisteuō* (“faith/believe”). The basic meaning of the *pist-* group of terms is “trust.” Members are self-identified as those who “trust in the Lord Jesus,” which involves having made a commitment of “faithfulness.”¹⁶ I would therefore suggest that the term *apistos* be translated “unpledged.”

Since the gathering and all of its ritual activities took place at the meal in the dining room, the *apistoi* would have been full participants in the meal but not as embedded in all of the rituals as were the *idiōtai*. For example, note that even though the *idiōtai* and the *apistoi* were both present for a prophetic proclamation, it is the *apistoi* alone who were subject to being spiritually changed by the event (14:24–25). The *apistoi* also extended dinner invitations, as seen in 10:27: “If someone who is an *apistos* invites you [to a dinner at his/her house], eat anything that is served without raising questions because of conscience.” This is usually interpreted as a social event with no relation to the *ekklēsia*. But it can also be read as an invitation to the *ekklēsia* meeting itself, especially since the term “you” in the text is the Greek plural form. Thus the meal described in 10:27 would also be an official *ekklēsia* event.¹⁷ In this case, an *apistos*, or “unpledged attendee,” is functioning as the host of the Christ group gathering.

Hosts and Hospitality

In a recent article on the identity of Erastus in Rom 16:23,¹⁸ Steve Friesen emphasizes how in Paul’s lengthy listing of individuals connected in some way to the Roman or Corinthian *ekklēsiai*, three are not designated as “brothers” or some other term indicating membership. Those three are Aristobulus (Rom 16:10) and Narcissus (Rom 16:11), both of whom are connected with the *ekklēsiai* in Rome, and Erastus (Rom 16:23), an *oikonomos* in Corinth. These three apparently share in common a patronage relationship to their respective *ekklēsiai*. Aristobulus and Narcissus are mentioned as the titular heads of households (Rom 16:10–11). Friesen concludes, and I agree, that this probably indicates that the households

15. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468. The reference is to Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens*, 247, 422.

16. Emphasized especially by Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 198–202.

17. I owe this interpretation to my advanced Greek students, Jen Bluestein, Eric Meyer, and Rolando Quiroz, who disagreed with the translation I had proposed and convinced me of the viability of this reading.

18. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 231–56.

of both were members but the named paterfamilias was not.¹⁹ In the case of Erastus, the text reads: “Erastus, the city *oikonomos* . . . greets you” (Rom 16:23). Friesen argues that Erastus was not the upper class “city treasurer” (*aedile*) that scholars often assume him to be. Rather, he proposes that the term *oikonomos* refers to a “low to mid-level functionary in the city’s financial administration, not a Roman citizen, and probably a slave.”²⁰ He concludes that Erastus must have played some sort of patronage role in the community in order to have been singled out for praise by Paul, but that role can no longer be determined. He rejects the idea that Erastus could have hosted a “house church” (or house gathering) and concludes that neither Aristobulus nor Narcissus nor Erastus were present at any of the gatherings because they were non-members.²¹ In contrast, I propose that Aristobulus, Narcissus, and Erastus should be identified as *apistoi* (“unpledged”) and, as such, were not only present at the gatherings but also hosted them. Chloe may have been another *apistos* host, since she is named only as the titular head of a household but is not the one who actually contacted Paul (1 Cor 1:11).

In Romans 16 Paul singles out several individuals for praise, many of whom are hosts of house gatherings. This text effectively functions as Paul’s version of the honorific decrees that were so common in the collection of association inscriptions.²² Like the association decrees, Paul’s commendations are extended to those who have bestowed patronage or some other kind of service on the association. Paul’s list in Romans 16 includes two different sets of household associations, some of which are at Rome, to whom greetings are sent, and some in Corinth, from whom greetings are sent. Of those named as hosts for the Corinthian gatherings, three are members: Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3) and Gaius (Rom 16:23).²³ Another household group in Corinth was that of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16), who was not only the host but was also a member. He was given honorific recognition by Paul in 1 Cor 16:15–18.

Phoebe is named as a “patron” or “benefactor” (*prostatis*) as well as a “table servant” (*diakonos*) for the *ekklesia* of Kenchreai. The combination of these two terms, “benefactor” and “table servant,” provides a window into the role of a

19. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 249–55.

20. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 245–49.

21. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 249 n. 55.

22. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 6.

23. Paul describes Gaius as “host to me and to the whole church.” This has led Murphy-O’Connor, in an influential study, to conclude that Gaius’s house was of an elite size so that all members in Corinth could gather there at the same time. He also concludes, based on a count of named individuals in 1 Corinthians and Acts, that there were forty members in all who gathered at his house and that, because of the large number, they would have met in the atrium rather than the dining room (Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth*, 153–59). If we follow the model proposed in this paper, however, a single gathering of forty people would be highly unlikely. Consequently, I interpret this verse to mean not that everyone gathered at the house of Gaius at one time but rather that everyone was always welcome at his house.

host at a house gathering. For a householder, hosting a gathering in one's home would carry the assumption that rules of hospitality would be followed. An invitation would be extended, as indicated in 1 Cor 10:27. The dining room would be appropriately prepared, servants provided, and the guests treated equitably, but also with appropriate regard for individual social ranking. Normally it was the host who determined positions on the couches; thus special favors extended by the host might be partially responsible for the divisiveness at the table addressed by Paul in 1 Cor 11:17–34.²⁴ Since this was a household association, control of the menu might belong to the *ekklēsia*, but in some cases, as in 1 Cor 10:27, the host may have some say in the menu. Indeed, 1 Corinthians may give us a window into a rather common problem of an association meeting in a household setting, namely that tension could have developed between the host and the leadership of the association over the details of the gathering so that their roles would have had to be negotiated.²⁵

Hospitality as a Theological Metaphor

Hospitality is one of Paul's key metaphors for grace in Romans. The first four commonly acknowledged metaphors are justification, redemption, expiation, and reconciliation (Rom 3:21–26; 5:1–11). Hospitality is not usually singled out, but it has significance equal to that of the other four. It is expressed most specifically in Rom 15:7: "Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you." It is the phrase "as Christ has welcomed you" that identifies hospitality as a metaphor for grace.

The term translated "welcome" in this text is *proslambanomai*, which in this context can be roughly rendered as "to extend a welcome or receive into one's home or circle of acquaintances." In its broader meaning, it carries the sense of "to take to oneself" with a variety of nuances. In this context, however, it expresses the practice of hospitality.²⁶ Similarly, in Philemon 17 it is used to refer to Philemon's obligations to offer hospitality both to Paul and to Onesimus; it is Philemon's role as host to the church that is being referenced here (see also 1–2).

In the LXX, *proslambanomai* is used to refer to God's covenantal relationship with God's people, as seen, for example, in 1 Sam 12:22: "with graciousness the Lord has received you (*proslambanomai*) to Godself as a people." See also Ps 65:4 (LXX 64:5): "Happy are those whom you choose and bring near (*proslambanomai*)." These texts provide further theological background for Paul's use of *proslambanomai* as a term for the extending of God's grace, that is, by means of God's having drawn a people near to Godself.

24. As suggested by Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 158–59.

25. Malherbe discusses such a situation in the community of the Johannine epistles; see "The Inhospitality of Diotrephes," 222–32.

26. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 883.

In its context, the text in Rom 15:7 (“welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you”) is used in reference to issues at the table in the Roman Christian community.

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them (Rom 14:1–3).

The phrases “God has welcomed them” (Rom 14:3) and “Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7), both of which employ the verb *proslambanomai*, express the principle of grace by means of the metaphor of hospitality. But notice that hospitality here is not an abstract metaphor; it is actually being experienced at the gathering. Paul gives it a dynamic function at their gathering by tying their experience at the table to an experience of grace. He then turns the experience of “grace received” into the social ethics of “grace offered” with the sense that the practice of the “welcome” to be extended to one another is to carry the same weight as the welcome received from Christ as experienced at the table (or as it should be experienced, if the supper is truly the Lord’s, and not their own, as Paul argues in 1 Cor 11:20–21). Thus in the specific context in Romans 14–15, to “welcome one another” means allowing for diversity in regard to food restrictions in order to maintain the unity of the community at the meal. More specifically, it addresses tensions that may arise between Jewish and gentile members at the house gathering.

Profile of a Markan Community (ca. 70s CE)

House Gatherings

The house as a gathering space of the Markan community is defined in specific contrast to the synagogue. We find this contrast at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he returns to Capernaum and goes first to a synagogue and then to a house.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21–28)

The synagogue is characterized as if it is foreign territory; it is “their synagogue” (1:23). It is also corrupt, since within it was “a man with an unclean

spirit" (1:23). The very existence of uncleanness in the synagogue is a symbol of its corruption. Jesus responds by casting the unclean spirit out of the synagogue, just as later he will cleanse the temple (11:15–19). But he is unable to save either institution (see especially 13:1–2). At one point in the story when Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue, he is rejected and he can only marvel at their unbelief (6:1–6).

The specific contrast of the house with the synagogue is indicated by the introduction to the next pericope:

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (Mark 1:29–31)

The contrast is clearly intentional, since they enter the house "as soon as they left the synagogue."²⁷ There is no unbelief or corruption to be found in the house, only an illness that prevents the appropriate hospitality from being offered. Once Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, she is able to carry out her role in the household, namely "to serve them." The term for "serve" is *diakonein*, which means to serve at a meal. She is pictured as having a necessary role in order for the household to function as it should, and by healing her Jesus empowers her to carry out that role, namely, to offer hospitality. Accordingly, in this story the role of Peter's mother-in-law is to serve as an example of one who serves the community.

Demographics

A close reading of Mark reveals that the idealized membership profile of Mark's community did not include the wealthy. The wealthy are like the seed planted among the thorns for whom the "lure of wealth" chokes off the word (4:18–19). They cannot enter the kingdom of God; their only chance is to sell off their possessions and give it all to the poor (10:17–23). Therefore, the community of the Gospel of Mark was self-identified as the poor.

Hospitality and the Markan Gathering

1. The hospitality motif in 2:15–17.

Mark 2:15–17 is a pivotal story that defines in idealized terms the social formation of the Markan community.

And as he reclined in his house [*kai ginetai katakeisthai auton en tē oikia autou*], many tax collectors and sinners were also reclining with [*sunanekeinto*] Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus

27. See also Boring, *Mark*, 65–66.

heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to invite (*kalesai*) not the righteous but sinners." (NRSV modified)

Notice that this is a group gathered by Jesus. He is the one who extends the invitation to the meal. Indeed, according to the logic of the story, the house, identified in the text only as "his house," is assumed to be Jesus' house. The story defines the group so gathered as engaged in community formation, which is the symbolism of "reclining together." The ancient banquet was universally understood to be a ritual moment for social bonding. For the Markan community, therefore, the ritual of eating together in a formal, reclining banquet in a house was where the magic happened, where the community was formed, and where redemption happened. Thus the concluding words of Jesus define this event as more than a mere meal: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to invite not the righteous but sinners" (2:17).

The story therefore connects the offering of hospitality in the house with the social formation of Jesus' followers. As such, it fits with what we know about the ancient house. The house was designed so that guests in the home were to be received in the dining room where the host would be expected to offer the finest of his hospitality.²⁸ Note also the use of the term "invite." It is a common term for an invitation to a meal. Here it is used as a pun: to be invited to the meal is to be invited, or "summoned," into the community of Jesus.

How might we imagine a reclining meal in a simple non-elite house? They would not have had couches and luxurious place settings; therefore we should probably not imagine a *triclinium*-style banquet. More likely is the *stibadium* style as shown in Figure 11 of Part One. This may be the style implied in Mark's description of the room where Jesus and his disciples reclined for the Last Supper (14:12–16; see also 14:18, "while they reclined"). The room is described as a large upstairs room that had already been prepared for dining. The term describing the set-up of the room is *strōnnumi*, which literally means "spread something" (14:15). While it could mean to furnish couches with pillows, it could just as likely mean to spread the floor with cushioning. That is a style that makes sense of the kinds of settings where the community of Mark would

28. One should not be too specific in relating this story to the ancient house. Boring, for example, refers to the conclusion drawn by many scholars that the presence of the Pharisees at the meal can be attributed to the design of houses so that casual passersby could observe a banquet in the dining room (*Mark*, 81). This is an over-historicizing of the story. Rather, as Boring also acknowledges, the Pharisees here play a literary role. Their question is addressed to the disciples, thus identifying them as more than passersby; rather they are essential characters to the story. This story is best interpreted as a narrative elaboration of the Q text in which Jesus is critiqued as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34; Matt 11:19). In actuality, while there were "public" areas in an elite house where clients of the householder were received, "the dining rooms, baths, and bedrooms were only for invited guests" (Clarke, *Houses of Roman Italy*, 12–13; see also Vitruvius *De architectura* 6.5).

gather. It would be in a room that was not specifically designed for dining but which could be adapted for that purpose.

Reclining was a custom that marked social status. In the Greek tradition, only free male citizens reclined. If women, children, slaves, or social inferiors were included in the meal, they would normally sit. In the Roman period, it became more common for reclining to be made available to those who might traditionally be excluded. Nevertheless, in such cases reclining continued to carry the symbolism of status.²⁹ Thus when tax collectors and sinners are pictured as reclining together with Jesus (2:15), it represents a symbolic acceptance of them as being given equal status within the community of God.

Of course, tax collectors and sinners are not specifically the poor. Rhetorically, the term stands for a category of individuals who are here being vilified by “the scribes of the Pharisees” as being unacceptable (2:16). Their rhetorical status therefore is “not Pharisees.” Also among the “not Pharisees” were the poor, as exemplified by the poor widow (12:41–44), who is specifically contrasted with the scribes “who like to . . . have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” and who “devour widows’ houses” (12:38–40). In the Markan community the place of honor at the house gathering might well be given to the poor widow.

2. The hospitality motif in chapter six.

Another text that symbolically pictures the community gathering is the multiplication of the loaves story in chapter six.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them to get all the people to recline in groups (Greek: *symposia* by *symposia*) on the green grass. So they reclined in dining groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his

29. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 14–18, 42–46; Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals*, 28–31.

disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mark 6:30–44, NRSV modified)

The story is introduced with the phrase “The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.” This takes the reader back to the story where Jesus sent them out two by two with these instructions:

Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them. (Mark 6:10–11)

This story contains echoes of the hospitality story in Mediterranean culture. Here the disciples are being compared to the divine messengers who monitor the hospitality practices of the people. Note the parallel to this text in Q: “it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town [where the disciples were not offered hospitality]” (Matt 10:14–15; Luke 10:10–12). The mission of the disciples, therefore, emphasized fostering the practice of hospitality in the house.

Between the sending out of the apostles and their return to report to Jesus is the story of a banquet given by Herod “for the leading men of Galilee” (Mark 6:14–29). This was a banquet of such debauchery that it resulted in the death of John the Baptist.

In specific contrast to the banquet of Herod, Jesus’ banquet is held in “a deserted place.” Instead of the elite who attend Herod’s banquet, Jesus’ guest list is made up entirely of the “crowd.” The contrast between these two banquets is given emphasis later in Mark’s story: “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod” (8:15). Identity is defined by the meal community—you are who you eat with.

The primary focus of 6:30–44 is the practice of hospitality. Here the crowd serves as the stranger in the hospitality equation. The disciples want to send them away to find food on their own, but Jesus commands “you give them something to eat.” The disciples are thus being instructed in the practice of hospitality.

There is more at stake in 6:30–44 than simple hunger. This is clear when Jesus commands that the people are to recline in separate dining groups, “*symposia* by *symposia*.” This is tantamount to saying, “have the people prepare themselves for a banquet.” Here in the rural countryside Jesus has convened a series of substitute house gatherings, with each dining group symbolically representing a separate house gathering.³⁰ Then he prepares for them a sumptuous meal with the appropriate ceremonial prayers.

30. Collins points out that the division of the reclining groups into “hundreds and fifties” (6:40) is a reference to the divisions of the eschatological community as described in the *Damascus Document*. She acknowledges, however, that this is a shift in imagery from the description in 6:39 that they reclined “*symposia* by *symposia*” (Mark, 324–25).

The command of Jesus that all in the crowd should recline (6:39) can be compared with Jesus' meal with tax collectors and sinners in which they all reclined together with Jesus. This is an important component of the way in which the Markan meal community was intended to function: no matter the social class, all were to recline together. It has an effect similar to the Mishnah's rule regarding the Passover: "even a poor man in Israel does not eat until he reclines."³¹

By definition, hospitality was a ritual of bonding with and caring for a category of individuals who represented the most radical symbol of "otherness," namely the "stranger." For Mark's community, as represented by these texts, the invitation was understood to be radically inclusive. Functionally, the extending of the invitation would only be a first step in community formation; it is the gathering itself that ritually produces that formation. Here the ritual action that is emphasized is the act of reclining together, thus indicating a social bonding that at the same time proclaimed the full equality of the diners despite the "otherness" of their social identity.

Social Stratification: Patrons, Servants, and Hosts

A house gathering required a supportive social structure. Someone needed to provide a house in which to meet. Such an individual would function culturally as a benefactor, which would suggest some degree of social stratification in the Markan community. Since the Markan community self-identified as the poor, there would not be a very high degree of social stratification. The houses in which they would meet would be modest, befitting the general social class of the group.

One character in the story who may function as a literary model for a host is Levi, the tax collector.

As [Jesus] was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (Mark 2:13-14)

The very next scene is the meal of Jesus with tax collectors and sinner (2:15-17). Interpreters have often noted how anomalous Levi's story is, for unlike every other named character who is "called" (see 1:16-20; 3:13), Levi is not included in Mark's list of the twelve (3:16-19).³² In Luke's version of this story he assumes that the house in which the meal was held belonged to Levi (Luke 5:29). Thus Levi's act of "following" Jesus consisted in hosting a meal for Jesus and his disciples and other tax collectors and sinners.³³ In Mark, however, Levi "follows" Jesus by becoming a participant in a meal hosted by Jesus. But since Levi has been summoned to "follow," he is more than a participant; he is also an

31. *Pesah* 10.1, as quoted in Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 147.

32. Boring, *Mark*, 80; Collins, *Mark*, 190-91.

33. This correlates with the theme in Luke-Acts that discipleship is exemplified by the act of hospitality. See discussion of Acts below.

observer and is thereby being instructed in the proper way to host a gathering of Jesus followers. Similarly, when in chapters 6 and 8 Jesus multiplies loaves to feed the crowd, each story functions as a teaching moment for the disciples. Jesus tells them to feed the crowd, then demonstrates how it is to be done. After arranging the crowd into dining groups and ceremonially blessing the food, he then gives it to the disciples to serve (6:41; 8:6). It is as if the Jesus of Mark is saying to the community leaders, "this is how hospitality at community gatherings is to be practiced."

At any reclining banquet it was necessary that there be servants. Normally those servants were slaves, and normally they would go unnoticed by the diners. In Mark, those who serve the meal are singled out as important figures in the community, ranging from Peter's mother-in-law (1:31) to the disciples at the multiplication of loaves stories. This is not entirely unprecedented. After all, in the classic hospitality story from the Hebrew Bible, Abraham himself serves his guests (Gen 18:8). On the other hand, in the Pauline communities, while Paul mentions the existence of slaves, he never defines their roles at the meals. In Mark, however, perhaps because there is a greater consciousness of the underclass as the core members of the community, serving at the table is designated as an honorary task. This idea became embedded in Christian tradition through the preservation of the term "deacon" (as in 1:31; see also Rom 16:1–2) as a position of honor and leadership.

Normally it was the householder who served as host of the meal and controlled the guest list. That is the model Jesus embodies when he dines with tax collectors and sinners. However, on the symbolic level, the story in 2:15–17 implies that, whoever may host the meal on the earthly level, Jesus is ultimately the one who invites (2:17). In this way this story is parallel to other cultic meals of the day in which the god is the one who invites to the banquet.³⁴

Profile of the Acts Community (ca. 110–120 CE)³⁵

House Gatherings

There are no church buildings in the literary world of Acts, nor are there any hints that church buildings were somewhere in the community's future. When the community gathers it is in a house or, rather, in houses, since each house would have a limited capacity for a gathering. The reader, being familiar with the social function of houses, would assume that a formal gathering would take place in the dining room at the dinner table, whether or not a meal was explicitly mentioned. To be sure, the apostles and other missionaries proclaimed in the temple and in synagogues. But neither of these locations was conducive to

34. See, e.g., invitations to the feasts of Zeus Panamara: "the god invites you to the sacred feast," quoted in Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 81; see further 81–84.

35. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in "Meals as a Literary Motif in Acts of the Apostles" and "Religious Practices of Early Christian Converts."

community formation. Rather temple and synagogue function in the plot of Acts as primarily locations where conflict with the Jewish leadership takes place.³⁶

At the very beginning of the story, the house is specified as the setting where community formation takes place: "Their time was spent in daily devotion to the rites in the temple and to the communal meals in their homes, meals that were characterized by festive joy and equal sharing with all" (Acts 2:46, author's translation). The house is sometimes mentioned in passing as the gathering place for the community. In 5:42, for example, after the apostles have been released from prison, flogged by the Sanhedrin, and ordered not to speak of Jesus again, they immediately continued to proclaim Jesus as Messiah "in the temple and in the various private homes" (*kat' oikon*). Whenever Saul begins to persecute the Jesus followers, he does so by "entering house after house (*kata tous oikous eisporethomenos*), dragging out both men and women, and delivering them to prison" (8:3). In 12:12–17, a more extended description of such a house gathering is presented. After Peter miraculously broke out of prison, he went "to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, where many had gathered and were praying." In all of these instances, the second-century reader would picture the scene in the dining room of the house, because that was the default location for gatherings.³⁷

Demographics

In the Gospel of Luke, the purpose of Jesus' ministry was especially focused on bringing "good news to the poor" (4:18) and "feeding the hungry" (6:21). The gospel addressed the issue of caring for the needy by envisioning a patron class, exemplified by Zacchaeus, who gave half of his possessions to the poor and is praised by Jesus (19:8–9). In Acts the care for the poor becomes embedded in the community itself. The community functions by means of a communal sharing of properties. Those who owned "goods and properties" sold all they had for the specific purpose of distribution to the needy (2:44–45; 4:32–37). These texts envision a stratified membership that includes a patron class as well as a significant proportion of poor and needy.

The idealized Acts community needed maintenance from time to time, aided by the power of God. Like the practice of associations in which those who did not pay their dues were penalized,³⁸ so also in Acts, those who did not give their

36. See, e.g., 13:44–47; 14:1–2; 17:1–5; 18:4–7; see also Elliott, "Temple vs. Household in Luke–Acts," 216–17.

37. Notice also that in the Gospel of Luke all the meals of Jesus, including some found only in this gospel, are reclining meals; see 5:29–32; 7:36–37; 9:14–15; 11:37; 12:37; 14:7–11, 15; 22:12–14, 27; 24:30.

38. See, e.g., the *Iobakchoi*, a Bacchic association in second-century Athens, whose regulations included specified penalties for failure to pay the prescribed dues: "[each member is to] pay a fixed monthly contribution for the wine. If anyone does not fulfill his obligation, he is to be excluded from the *stibas*" (Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 119, 129 lines 46–48; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 255; note that *stibas* was a term for the banquet meeting).

fair share were penalized. This is the theme of a warning story in Acts 5:1–11. Here a certain Ananias conspired with his wife, Sapphira, to hold back some of the proceeds from the sale of their properties. Peter became aware of this and accused them of “lying to God.” As a result, they were both struck dead.

In Acts 6:1–6 another disciplinary matter was addressed. In this case there was a dispute about inequities in the distribution of food to widows. The solution was to appoint spirit-filled individuals who were charged with the task of overseeing the food distribution (*diakonein trapezais*, “wait on tables, serve meals”).³⁹ It was a matter of utmost importance to the community that its identity as defined in 2:44–45 and 4:32–37 be maintained. Thus the direct involvement of the power of God was invoked. These texts together reinforce the idea that “care for the needy” was primarily concerned with the provision of food, particularly at the daily communal meals (2:46; 6:1).

The place of women at a Hellenistic/Roman reclining banquet could be tenuous, ranging from exclusion from the banquet to taking on the lower class role of sitting rather than reclining to taking on an honored role as a reclining banqueter. In the Acts story women who are named as householders and hosts of the banquet would have reclined in a place of honor befitting their status as patrons. This group included Mary the mother of John Mark (12:12–17), Lydia (16:13–15, 40), and Priscilla, wife and equal partner in ministry with her husband Aquila (18:2–3). Widows were included among the poor and needy, the lowest status group at the table. They were to be treated as equals at the table (6:1–6), but it is unclear whether the reader was to assume that they reclined or sat at the table. Another class of women at the gathering is represented by Rhoda, a slave attendant who likely served at the table rather than participating as one of the diners (12:12–17). She is one of the few women in Acts who is both named and given a speaking part, yet the role she plays in the story is that of the stereotypical clueless slave, a role commonly found in Roman comedies of the era.⁴⁰ Shelly Matthews has concluded that “the overarching rhetorical aim of this author is . . . to circumscribe women within limited social and ecclesiastical roles.”⁴¹ That is to say, the core group of leaders in the Acts story is all men. This is illustrated early on when the apostles are gathered in the upper room of a house (1:13–14). Women are included in their number, but only Mary, mother of Jesus, is named, and none play any defined role in this scene or in subsequent events.

39. I disagree with Danker’s interpretation of this phrase in which he suggests that it is “improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal” and so thinks that *diakonein* here must mean “administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows without specifying the kind of assistance that is allotted” (p. 230). But the text *does* specify it is “tables” that are attended to, that is, the tables on which the communal meals were served. Associations were also known to appoint officers to see that food distribution took place equitably (Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 217).

40. Harrill, “Dramatic Function.”

41. Matthews, “Women in Acts,” 193.

The Acts Idealized Community as a Household Association

Acts 2:42–47 has numerous parallels to by-laws of Greco-Roman associations.⁴² The primary difference is in the genre. Associations wrote by-laws in a type of “legal” language that were then inscribed on stone or written on papyrus and posted at the meeting place. Acts is written in a descriptive narrative form. They also differ in another key respect. Association by-laws provided rules for actual meal practice. Acts 2:42–47 describes an idealized community of the distant past.

In my translation below I have given special attention to the affinity of Acts 2:42–47 to the by-laws of a specific association.

The new members were diligent in following the by-laws instituted by their recognized leaders, the apostles, namely to be loyal to the community, to participate in all of its communal meals, and to practice faithfully the prescribed communal prayers. A sense of awe pervaded the community as deeds of supernatural power were performed in their midst under the authority of the apostles. All of these believers were united in one community in which they shared all their goods, even to the point that goods and properties were sold and the proceeds given to members in need. Their time was spent in daily devotion to the rites in the temple and to the communal meals in their homes, meals that were characterized by festive joy and equal sharing with all.⁴³ They exemplified a communal life devoted to the praise of God and, as a result, were well regarded by all outsiders. On a daily basis, newcomers who were led by the Lord to join them were added to their rolls.

The statutes of the Zeus Hypsistos association (first century CE) provides useful comparative data.⁴⁴

The law which those of the association of Zeus the highest made in common, that it should be authoritative. / ⁵Acting in accordance with its provisions, they first chose as their / president Petesouchos the son of Teephebenis, a man of parts, worthy of the place and of the company, / for a year from the month and day aforesaid, / that he should make for all the contributors one banquet a month in the sanctuary of Zeus, / at which they should in a common room pouring libations, pray, and perform the other customary rites / ¹⁰on behalf of the god and lord, the king. All are to obey the president / and his servant in matters pertaining to the corporation, and they shall be present at / all command occasions to be prescribed for them and at meetings and assemblies and outings. / It shall not be permissible for any one of them to . . . make factions or to leave the brotherhood of the president for another, / ¹⁵or for men to enter into one

42. Smith, “Religious Practices,” 159–61; Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 211–15; Öhler, “Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde.”

43. The Greek (*en aphelotēti kardias*) is obscure. Here I have adopted the translation “with generous heart” (Conzelmann, *Acts*, 24; Johnson, *Acts*, 59) versus “simplicity of heart” (Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 155; Pervo, *Acts*, 88).

44. Roberts, Skeet, and Nock, “Gild of Zeus Hypsistos,” 40–42; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 106.

another's pedigrees at the banquet or / to abuse one another at the banquet or to chatter or to indict or accuse another or to resign / for the course of the year or again to bring the drinkings to nought.

Both the Acts idealized community and the Zeus Hypsistos association were governed by rules that defined their community life together, a community life that centered on the communal meal. The rules of the Acts idealized community are defined by the "by-laws (*hē didachē*; "teaching") of the apostles" and those of the Zeus Hypsistos association by its statutes (*ho nomos*; literally "law"). The communal meal in Acts is defined as "breaking of bread" (*hē klasis tou artou*; 2:42, 46). It is called a *posis* and a *symposion* in the statutes of the Zeus Hypsistos association, both of which can be translated "drinking party" or simply "banquet." Whereas the Acts idealized community practiced some of its rituals at the temple (*en tō hierō*) and its communal meals in the dining rooms of houses (*kat' oikon*; 2:46), the Zeus Hypsistos association met "in a common dining room" (*en andrōni koinōi*) located "in the sanctuary of Zeus" (*en tōi tou Dios hierōi*).

At their common meals the Acts idealized community practiced faithfully the communal prayers as prescribed by the apostles, prayers whose content is not specified. Similarly, at the banquet meetings of the Zeus Hypsistos association, they were to "pour libations, pray (*euchesthōisan*), and perform the other customary rites (*ta nomizomena*)," but it is not clear what was the content of "customary rites." What is clear is that religious rituals appropriate to the gathered group were regularly practiced.

Meals and Social Formation

The significance of the meal as constitutive of the community is foundational to the formation stories beginning in Acts 2:42–47. In chapters 10–11 and 15, the primary issue is the divisive effect of dietary laws in relation to the emerging gentile mission. In chapters 1–9, the community of Jesus followers had been entirely made up of Jewish converts. The Cornelius story in 10–11 introduces the gentile mission as a radical and unexpected development orchestrated by God. Peter has to be convinced of the legitimacy of the mission by a vision from God. Three times the vision presents Peter with a choice of unclean animals and commands that he "kill and eat." Each time he refuses, pointing out that he has always followed the dietary laws. At that point messengers arrive from Cornelius, a gentile centurion God-fearer in Caesarea who had also received a vision from God to seek out Peter. Peter, convinced by God's vision to him and to Cornelius, offers hospitality to the messengers (10:23), all of whom were gentiles (10:7). This is the first instance in which Peter eats with gentiles. The second instance is when he accepts the offer of hospitality from Cornelius (10:48). Consequently, whenever in chapter 11 Peter must answer to the "apostles and brothers" in Judea, they immediately accuse him of "eating with" the uncircumcised (11:3).

The issue is food, or more specifically, the communal meals that lie at the heart of community formation. The ultimate conclusion will be that, unless gentiles can eat at the same table with other members of the community, they cannot be considered brothers and sisters in Christ.

The issue of dietary laws is brought up again whenever Paul's mission to the gentiles is under review by the apostolic leadership in Judea (Acts 15). During the discussion, Peter reminds the group of his experience in the Cornelius episode. Then James develops a compromise position that incorporates a simplified version of dietary laws, often called the Noahide laws.⁴⁵ It was intended to allow gentiles and Jews to eat at the same table utilizing the same menu. The council agrees with James, a letter is drafted, and Paul is delegated to circulate it to the gentile communities (15:22–29; 21:25). Luke got the basic details of such a conference from Paul (Gal 2:1–10).⁴⁶ But the idea of an apostolic decree regarding food laws was his own contribution to the story in order to advance his literary agenda. This story illustrates the importance of equal sharing at the communal meals regardless of dietary restrictions. It is a variation of the earlier theme of equal sharing at the communal meals regardless of social status. The overall motif is that the community realizes its identity as community at the communal meals.

Hospitality and the Acts Gathering

In Luke–Acts, to offer hospitality to a guest in one's home meant to provide them with a sumptuous meal. Depending on the context, overnight lodging might be signified as well. There are two terms in Acts that refer to the act of hospitality: *xenizein* ("offer hospitality") and *menein* ("stay [with]"). The term *xenizein* is the verb form of *xenos* which means either guest or host in a hospitality context. The meaning of "stay with" as a hospitality term is clarified in the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke (24:13–35). When the two travelers arrive at their destination, they invite the stranger (Jesus) to "stay" (*menein*; 24:29) with them. The meaning of the term "stay" is indicated in the very next verse: "while he was reclining with them, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them" (24:30). Thus, in Luke–Acts the term "stay" takes on a technical meaning for the hospitality motif as indicating both a sumptuous meal and perhaps an overnight stay.

In Acts hospitality is offered and received in several stories. Hospitality with gentiles offered and received is central to the Cornelius story, as discussed above. At the beginning of the story Peter is in Joppa where he has accepted the hospitality of Simon the tanner. In 9:43 the term for accepting Simon's hospitality is *menein*. In 10:6 the term for the same act of hospitality is *xenizein*, showing

45. Segal, "Acts 15"; Livesey, "So-Called Noahide Laws."

46. Smith and Tyson, *Acts and Christian Beginnings*, 164–75.

that the two terms can be used interchangeably. When Peter offers hospitality to the arriving gentile messengers from Cornelius, the term is *xenizein* (10:23). When the gathered group at Cornelius' house offers hospitality to Peter, the term is *epimenein* (10:48).

One sign of true discipleship in Acts is the offering of hospitality by the recent convert. It plays a key role in conversion stories as a proof-of-piety motif. This is seen in 10:48, discussed above, where after being baptized the household of Cornelius immediately offers hospitality to Peter. It is also highlighted in the story of the conversion of Lydia in 16:11–15, a story that echoes the Cornelius story. Like Cornelius (10:20), Lydia is a gentile God-fearer (16:14) and a householder with an extended household. Her conversion is aided by the direct intervention of God ("the Lord opened her heart"; 16:14). Both she and her household are baptized, after which she immediately "urged" Paul and his companions to accept her offer of hospitality at her house. Her reason for making this offer is instructive: "if you judge me to be faithful (*pistē*) to the Lord" (16:15). Hospitality as a test of true discipleship could not be made more explicit.

The Lydia story also traces the theory of house church formation as presented in Acts. Paul first preaches in a synagogue, or, in this instance, "prayer hall" (*proseuchē*; 16:13), but the actual community formation takes place in a house, and it is occasioned by the offer of hospitality by the recently converted householder. As further confirmation, note that before leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas stop by at Lydia's house, where a group of believers were gathered (16:40). Lydia's house had become a full-fledged house gathering. Just as was the case in the earlier theme of sharing possessions with all in need, so also here the idealized Acts community depends on its patron class to be the backbone of community formation.

Another theme to emerge from the story of Lydia is that hospitality is initially offered to the evangelist. This becomes an essential component of the success of the evangelistic mission in Acts. Both Peter and Paul are supported in their travels by the hospitality of householders who are either explicitly or implicitly assumed to be members (9:43; 10:6; 17:7; 18:3, 7; 21:4, 8; 21:17; 28:7, 14).

A rather obscure use of the hospitality motif is found in Acts 27:33–38, a text that also contains the "breaking bread" trope. The scene takes place on the storm-damaged drifting ship just before it runs aground at Malta. Food has become scarce and the crew has not eaten in fourteen days. Paul urges them to eat to build up their strength since, based on a vision he has received from God, "none of you will lose a hair from your heads" (27:34). The meal scene itself is reminiscent of Jesus' meals in Luke: Paul "took bread, gave thanks to God before them all, broke it, and began to eat" (27:35). In response to what Paul has said and done, the crew "cheered up and also took food" (27:36). There seems to be a disconnect between these two verses so that Paul and the others appear to eat separate meals. The Western text clears this up by expanding on Paul's

actions with an additional phrase: “[Paul] began to eat and gave some to us.”⁴⁷ This reading may have functioned to make explicit what for the ancient reader was implicit in this scene. In the context, Paul has just spotlighted God’s care for the entire group. He then breaks bread in a ritual format, including giving thanks to God in a public manner. This text is meant to be read in the context of the meal motif throughout Acts so that Paul is here offering hospitality to a group of non-member gentiles just as Peter does for the messengers from Cornelius in 10:23. In both cases, the non-member gentiles at the meal have been blessed by God’s compassion and impartiality, an attribute of God explicitly named by Peter (10:34–35). These are examples of how “food/meals in Acts are not simply focused on group identity or ‘fellowship’ . . . but also function as catalysts for shifts to recruitment from the outside.”⁴⁸

Some Conclusions

The House as a Catalyst for Social Formation

Social formation took place at a communal meal, but not just in any location. The house was an essential component of the ritual process because it was a space in which hospitality was assumed in order for a gathering to take place. Theories that place the worship gathering in a space other than the house have to account for the presumed absence of the hospitality component of the formation ritual. The importance of the house to Christ-group gatherings over a period of several generations speaks to its importance to fundamental aspects of social and identity formation.

Reflections on the Hospitality Motif

As a theological metaphor for the “Christ event,” hospitality presumes a relationship between two “others” who within the world of the story represent the whole of humanity. And while it is an act of patronage that creates a relationship of patron/client, it does not participate easily in what is in effect an imperial metaphor. This is because the hospitality “myth” overturns the patronage default by defining the “client” as a “patron in disguise” and the patron as a once or soon-to-be client. It is a clever theological/rhetorical move, embedded in the myth itself, which enables hospitality to aspire to a relationship of mutuality rather than a rigid relationship of powerful versus powerless. Indeed, in the rhetoric of the hospitality myth there is a playful move in which the “host” becomes humble servant of the guest and serves the meal. Hospitality is therefore a ritual act that seeks to create a zone of mutuality and relationship across the starkest of boundaries within a world of suspicion, hostility, and conflict.

47. Pervo, *Acts*, 641.

48. Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 211 n. 12. Ascough, however, downplays the importance of hospitality in the meal scenes in Acts (p. 207 n. 2), a point with which I disagree.

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