

Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell, eds., *After the First Urban Christians. The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009). Pp. xii + 175. Paper. \$29,95. ISBN 056-7-21967-4

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*After the First Urban Christians* by Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell is the fruit of the symposium held in 2008 dedicated to reassess the contribution of Wayne Meek's volume, *The First Urban Christians*, twenty five years after its appearance. Each of the essays comprised in the book begins by appraising the material presented by Meeks, and then offers a survey of subsequent developments in a particular field of study with the authors' suggestions as to where future research might proceed. The purpose of the study is to introduce a new generation of students to Meeks's book and to provide an outline of the current discussion on the various areas addressed in *The First Urban Christians*. The volume consists of introduction and eight chapters followed by bibliography, index of biblical and ancient references, modern authors, and subjects.

In Introduction, the editors, Horell and Still, stress first of all the importance of Meeks's book which, even if not being a pioneering effort, practically brought to mature and fruition the social-scientific approach to New Testament. Meeks synthesized much of the innovative works of Theissen and others, but also covered new areas and advanced new proposals that inspired subsequent studies. After the brief appraisal of Meek's work, each essay comprised in the volume is presented in a concise way giving the reader an orientation in areas covered by different authors.

In Chapter 1, "Whither Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation? Reflections on Contested Methodologies and the Future", David Horrell discusses Meek's use of social-scientific resources and the appropriateness of his methodology. Meeks himself called it "eclectic" and aimed to construct a picture of life of ordinary people who joined the Christian movement. It was heavily criticized by Malina and Elliot for its lack of

theoretical foundations. To respond these accusations, the author first shows the key developments in the field of social studies of the New Testament, then exposes the criteria used by Malina to count a work as social-scientific, and, on the basis of other socio-anthropological publications, shows the limited character of Malina's definition. Against those calling Meeks "social historian", rather than "social scientist", Horrell argues for a broader definition of social science and points to its possible fruitful development in literary ethnography, Marxian economic and social history, in iconological and postcolonial studies.

In Chapter 2, "Contours of the Urban Environment", Peter Oakes taking up Meek's study of the urban environment of Pauline Christianity indicates its merits but also selective character. It does not offer a sustained general description of what the ancient city looked like, and which groups lived there. Consequently, the author supplies the readers with the physical and social picture of the ancient city taking as a model Roman Pompeii. Oakes starts with its topography, streetscape and housing design (the mixture of large houses, small apartments, shops, and bars), to show then the city social, political, and economic structure (forum honoring the town's benefactors, elite group, whose composition continually changed, and the network of clients). Subsequently the author discusses Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth against the Pompeian backdrop to demonstrate both their commonalities and distinctive aspects.

Chapter 3 by Bruce Longenacker, "Socio-Economic Profiling of the First Urban Christians", deals with Meeks's picture of Jesus's followers as the so-called "status inconsistent" people, the ones whose position was ambiguous in the Greco-Roman world. What attracted them to the Christian movement was the change empowering Gospel and the emotion-charged language of family absent in other organizations. Longenacker adduces the voices criticizing Meeks's theory and presents the whole spectrum of opinions on the economic level of Jesus's followers. The author corrects Meeks skepticism about the number of poor belonging to Christian movement and the limited household background on which he based his studies. Consequently, drawing on Meggit's and Friesen's models, the author presents Pauline communities as composed of a significant number of destitute members mixed with various middle class adherents. Consequently, applying modified Friesen's model to 1-2 Corinthians, 1-2 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philemon, the author analyzes the rhetorical construction of communities' economic profile. According to the author, it gravitates toward those at subsistence level. The representatives of middle class, who joined the Christian communities and supported them with their own means, certainly could not count there on the same honors as the ancient patronage system offered them. What they found there instead might have been a rest from "the relentless quest for

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honor capture in the civic arena” and “the basis for status realignment in spirited groups of the first urban Christians”.

In Chapter 4, “First-Century Models for Paul’s Churches: Selected Scholarly Developments Since Meeks”, Edward Adams focuses on Meeks’s survey of the four comparative models for the Pauline churches from the first-century environment: the household, the voluntary association, the synagogue, and the philosophical or rhetorical school. Subsequently, the author presents an overview of the scholarly works which discuss the above mentioned groups, and assesses Horsley’s thesis on the Pauline congregation as an alternative society within the Roman Empire. According to the author, it is not clear how Paul could perceive his congregations as a version of the civic assemblies in the same time to be imitated and competed with. Ultimately, Adams calls for a more careful distinction to be made between various types of organizations and Pauline churches, and warns against fixating on any particular model. Meeks himself offered only a comparative analysis stressing the similarities and differences, and concluding that none of the above mentioned categories quite fits. The focal point of scholarly investigation should be then generic features and practices of the first-century groups .

In Chapter 5 by Todd Still, “Organizational Structures and Relational Struggles Among the Saints: The Establishment and Exercise of Authority within Pauline Assemblies”, the author deals with Meeks’s examination of organizational dimension or structure of authority within Pauline churches. Synopsis and analysis of Meeks’s chapter on governance draws attention to its merits in better understanding of the structures of power in Paul, but also points at minor faults like extrapolations being made from the socio-economic situation of Pauline congregation to that of another, questionable conclusions on the development of church leadership, or attention paid only to the passages characterized by intergroup conflicts. Subsequently, Still considers academic work germane to the subject in the view, pointing at Paul’s use of metaphors to describe relations between him and his churches, institutionalization within Pauline congregations, and Paul’s perception of authority. The author then extends his investigation further to pertinent texts from Romans, Philippians, Philemon, and 2 Thessalonians, focusing on their portrait of leaders and warrants for authority. Finally, Still concludes with the image of Paul’s congregations characterized by the three binary pairings: conflict and community, mutuality and authority, structure and spontaneity, which ultimately result from the paradoxical character of the Gospel.

In Chapter 6, “Ritual and the First Urban Christians: Boundary Crossings of Life and Death”, Louis Lawrence provides a critical assessment of Meeks’s categorization of rituals into “major” and “minor”, and “unknown”

and “controverted”, which highlights the centrality of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but does not address internal group disputes. Then, she considers some key developments inspired by Meek’s work like ethnography, ritual and morality (the moral formation in Christian communities as achieved by embodiment in ritual and liturgy), ritual and constructive social memory (rituals as a fusion of past and present to restore social unity), and ritual and imperial powers (Eucharist as a form of solidarity promotion and resistance to the oppressive imperial regime). Ultimately, according to the author, ritual with its general focus on the boundary between life and death served Christians to de-emphasize the event of physical death.

Chapter 7, “Patterns of Belief and Patterns of Life” by Dale Martin is dedicated to the correlations between patterns of belief and certain aspects of social experience pointed by Meeks (monotheism promoting church’s unity, personal and active God and the intimacy of the local household assembly, eschatology and the crucified Messiah as a fundament of community life infused with paradoxes and contradictions). Trying to precise the meaning of the correlations drawn by Meeks, Martin first explores the works that followed and went beyond the agenda set out by *The First Urban Christians*. Consequently, the author discusses the critical approach of the Context Group, to finish with the studies fueled by liberation theology and feminism. The final part of the essay is construed as a response to the critiques claiming that the social-scientific account reduces the religious belief to mere social or political realities. Martin reports Meeks’s position holding that social correlation does not say anything about the truth of belief and contends that the survey inspired by him is a fruitful and important approach to understand early Christianity.

The final essay in Chapter 8, “Taking Stock and Moving On”, is Wayne Meeks’s own reflection on the methodology, development and future of his social scientific studies. Addressing the complaints about method, Meeks once again confirms his choice to adopt a practical eclecticism as a normal practice of sociologists and anthropologists. According to the author, the excavations of ancient cities like Pompeii, and the complexity of living space which they bring to light, call the scholars to reconsider their assumptions about the so-called house church. Meeks also still considers the “success” of early Christianity, which has inspired so many works, a standing issue helpful to understand the process of conversion. Looking for parallels between *ekklēsia* and other social organizations, the author points to the associations of immigrants and household communities, the latter one as a particularly promising field of research. Coming to the topic of governance, Meeks notes an interpretative impasse between the scholars appraising Paul’s

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leadership and those accusing him of manipulation. The author also stresses a common error to be avoided, namely, the confusion between “legitimacy” and “authority” in Paul. Finally, Meeks explains that his categorization of rituals into major and minor was not intended to isolate some of them and claims that their fuller understanding will surely shed new insights on the formative years of the Christian movement.

Assessing *After the First Urban Christians* one should say that its value is intrinsically connected with Meeks groundbreaking work. It is a worthy effort of bringing to light the volume that marked the landscape of New Testament social studies and inspired so many scholars. *After the First Urban Christians* presents the reader with an interesting selection of the issues raised by Meeks, offers their critical survey, and shows the directions in which they developed. The authors point to the places where the proposals of Meeks might be refined or changed, claiming that generally the theses advanced in *The First Urban Christians* stand firm in scholarly debate. Despite the disclaimers of the editors, one may have an impression that *After the First Urban Christians* is an honorific volume dedicated to Meeks with only little space left to his critics. It might have been different if some of them had been invited to contribute to the present volume. Anyway *After the First Urban Christians* is an impressive and most welcome project of synthesizing the ideas and issues advanced by Meeks in 1983. It shows how the social scientific studies on Paul has developed since then and suggests where the future research might still proceed. Every scholar and student working in this field should be definitely equipped with this valuable publication.