

# Introduction to the NT

Session 2: Who were the poor? Who were the rich?  
Looking at the socio-economic context behind the text

# *What we know about early Christian groups*

The Acts of the Apostles provides evidence of the socio-economic composition of the earliest Christian groups.

- Jerusalem            2.44-45; 4.32-35, 36-37; 5.1-11; 6.1-6; 12.11-15
- Joppa                 9.36-43
- Caesarea            10.1-2, 34-35
- Antioch             13.1
- Iconium             14.1
- Lystra              16.1
- Philippi            16.11-15
- Thessalonica      17.1-9
- Beroea             17.10-12
- Corinth             18.1-3
- Ephesus            19.27-20

# *What we know about early Christian groups*

1. What does this evidence from the Acts of the Apostles tell us about the socio-economic composition of the earliest Christian groups?
2. Why might it be helpful to know something about the socio-economic composition of the earliest Christian groups?

# *What we know about early Christian groups*

Meyer's 'impressionistic sketch' of early Christian groups based on the Pauline epistles:

- members of the *household of Caesar* – 'virtually the civil service of the Roman Empire' – upwardly mobile!
- freedmen / women and descendants of freedmen / women who have advanced in wealth and position, especially in the Roman colonies of Corinth and Philippi
- wealthy artisans and traders: high in income, low in occupational prestige
- wealthy independent women
- wealthy Jews

# *What we know about early Christian groups*

Meyer's 'impressionistic sketch' of early Christian groups based on the Pauline epistles:

- people of several social layers are brought together
- the extreme top and bottom of the Greco-Roman social scale are missing (no mention of landed aristocrats and senators; no mention of people who are destitute – but not necessarily surprising as the poorest of the poor would be absent from urban centres)
- the levels in between are well represented
- the 'typical' Christian evident in the Pauline epistles is a free artisan or small trader, possibly with houses and slaves, the ability to travel, and having some wealth
- Some of the wealthy provided housing, meeting places, and other services for individual Christians and for whole groups: they acted as *patrons*

# *What we know about early Christian groups*

The Pauline epistles provide evidence of the structure of the earliest Christian groups.

- 1 Corinthians 1.16, 11; 16.15
- Romans 16.1-16
- Philippians 4.22

# *Household*

The local structure of the early Christian groups appears to be linked to the basic unit of society: *household*.

*Household* in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek-Roman society is much broader than *household* in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

It would include:

- immediate relatives
- slaves
- freedmen and women
- hired workers
- possibly tenants and partners in trade or craft

# *Household*

Appears likely that Christian groups formed around the existing socio-economic structure in 1<sup>st</sup> Greek-Roman society with its associated networks:

- internal: kinship, clientele
- external: friendship, occupation

and hierarchy

- *paterfamilias*

The household provided a physical meeting place ('home') which afforded privacy, intimacy and stability.



# *Household*

Authority was provided within the household by the *paterfamilias*.

- Colossians 3.18-4.1
- Ephesians 5.21-6.9
- 1 Peter 2.13-3.7

# *Household*

Likely that the number of households in each city representing Christian groups varied from place to place and from time to time, with several co-existing in each place:

- 1 Corinthians 1.16, 16.15-19; Acts 18.8; Romans 16.23; Colossians 4.15

Does 1 Corinthians 1-4 provide evidence of disputes between different Christian groups in the same place?

- 1 Corinthians 1.10-16

# *Household*

Unlikely that the Christian group associated with a particular household was limited to members of that household.

The Christian group associated with a particular household could include tenants, partners in trade or craft, and new converts.

Possible influence of *Voluntary Associations*.

# *Voluntary Associations*

*Voluntary Associations* were an important form of social relationship in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek-Roman society.

*Voluntary Associations* were formed by friends, relatives, neighbours or working associates:

- draw up a constitution with officers
- find a meeting place
- declare themselves an *Association*

Typically minimum 12 and maximum 40 members.

# *Voluntary Associations*

When the Association met:

- eat a meal a bit better than normal
- drink some good wine supplied by the member whose turn it was
- celebrate the birthday of the founder or the patron, or the feast day of their deity
- draw up rules to ensure members would have a decent burial when they died

# *Ekklesia*

We read the word *church* in the NT (Greek: *ekklesia*) and are in danger of imposing our understanding onto NT texts.

How *ekklesia* is used in the Pauline epistles:

- Romans 16.5; Philemon 2; Colossians 4.15
- Romans 16.1; 1 Corinthians 1.2; Philippians 4.15
- 1 Corinthians 16.19; Galatians 1.2; 2 Corinthians 1.1; 8.1;  
1 Thessalonians 1.1
- 1 Corinthians 1.2; 10.32

# Bibliography

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Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: the social world of the Apostle Paul* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

