

The Jesus Cult – the First Fifty Years

The paper presented below is by Fr Gerard Wilkinson CM of the Australian Province of the Vincentians. It was submitted to the University of New England (Armidale NSW) as part of a Studies in Religion Course. The full topic of the article reads:

“Discuss the historical setting of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles (especially those of Paul) and what they contribute to an understanding of the development of the Jesus cult in the first fifty year of its existence.”

We must admit that in limiting consideration of the first fifty years of the Jesus cult to those areas of the Roman Empire covered by Acts, Paul and the Epistles we encompass just a small portion of the early development of the Jesus people. The Jesus cult was extant during the first few decades in area not covered by the Acts of the Apostles for example Egypt and Eastern Syria to mention just two. However sources for these areas are few, fragmentarily and less well attested than Acts.¹ Our consideration is then limited.

The picture is of basically urban groups in the mercantile and official classes; while some were Jewish many were from amongst the *God Fearers*. Because it was customary for the whole household to follow the *Patron* or *Pater Familias*, the Jesus people included slaves as well as the wealthy with the social and class distinction that this implied.

The Acts of the Apostles is attributed to “Luke” as is the third Gospel. The present Greek text has had two possibly three recensions with only the first by the original author.² It is late 1st or early 2nd Century CE as the Macquarie fragment attests. “Initially Greek, the common language of the Roman East was the main vehicle for the transmission of Christianity”³ The New Testament texts on which we rely for the Bible are heavily in Greek which seems to have been the language of composition for all except Matthew whose Hebraisms point to an Aramaic original.

The First Century CE date of acts would place it close to the events it sets out to chronicle with the presumption of historical accuracy that this would imply. But did Luke intend to write history? Acts follows theological understanding of history. Luke employs a number of techniques similar to those of Deuteronomic history - amongst others is the writing of narrative through a series of characters.⁴

¹ The tests of the Acts of Thomas for example are fragmentary and later than our texts of the Acts of the Apostles. Cf. Elliott. J.K., *The Apocryphal New Testament*. P439.

² Own lecture notes unit AHPG852 “Documents illustrating the New Testament” Macquarie University.

³ Parry. Ken, et al Ed. 1999, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, p xiv.

⁴ Cf. Rosner. Brian S., 1993, *Acts of the Apostles in its Literary Setting* p 75ff.

One common feature of most of these biographical complexes of Old Testament and Jewish tradition is that they are composed of individual narratives which contain particular striking scenes or anecdotes⁵

The present is encouraged to become part of biblical history....by describing current events as if they were the Bible's perspective.⁶

The initial post ascension narrative is Peter's initiative to add to the group of authoritative figures with the election of Matthias and so seemingly to continue to align the 12 to the tribes of Israel. The early pericopes prepare for future themes. Peter is cast as the leader and spokesman and matches the wonders performed by Jesus (Acts 3:1, 9:32, 36 and Lk 8:51).⁷ Then follow narratives of Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira, the angelic releases of Peter from prison (Acts 5:17 & 12) and appearances before the Sanhedrin. The intervention of Gamaliel (Acts 5: 34ff) is used to infer Divine approval.⁸

Luke presages the Jew and gentile problem with the election of the Seven and the death of Stephen. Also the foundation for future evangelisation is laid with Philip and the eunuch and in Samaria with Peter in Jaffa and Caesarea. Peter in urban centres sets the tone for Damascus, Antioch, and a multitude of towns to follow in the story of Acts.⁹ The Simon the Magician story prepares for the telling of future problems. Peter and to a lesser extent John dominate the early portion but with chapter 9 the main character becomes Paul about whom the rest of Acts revolves. Moessner has Luke casting Paul as a prophet like Moses in "prophetic mould a la Jesus the Deuteronomic Prophet like Moses".¹⁰

An argument can also be made that Paul was a *Merkabah* mystic in the mould of Ezekiel.¹¹ Luke is clearly casting Paul as a prophet who receives a mission. Perhaps this is to make Paul more appealing the Jewish Christians. While

Both Paul and Ezekiel receive a revelation, heard a voice and fell to the ground. The striking different is that's Paul's charge is to go to the Gentiles and not only to the Jews¹²

However

As a sectarian person, Paul helped lead a group of people, including many Jews and some Gentiles, to define themselves as people of God and take over for themselves the terminology and concepts that previously had been applied to non-Christian Jews. This social agenda, along with Paul's zealous mode of pursuing it, is what produced such strong and even at times violent reaction to him and his ministry. One either loved or hated him. There was hardly any middle ground.¹³

⁵ Martin Hengel quoted in Rosner *ibid* p 77.

⁶ James L. Kugel quoted in Rosner *ibid* p 73.

⁷ There are similar reports about Paul e.g. Acts 14:8.

⁸ The variant "Do not therefore touch these men lest you find yourselves at war with God"

⁹ The urban nature of early Christianity is chronicled by Meeks. W.A. *The First Urban Christians*.

¹⁰ Cf. Rosner *Op. cit.* p 71.

¹¹ The effort to psychoanalyse Ezekiel sees Halperin, David. In *Seeking Exekeil: Text and Psychology* need not sway us from a comparison with Pasul.

¹² Rosner. *Op.Cit.* p 72 Cf. Acts9 & Ezk. 1.

¹³ Witherington III. Ben, 1998, *The Paul Quest, The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*. P 299.

Luke's narrative has Paul in Damascus¹⁴ causing just such controversy (Acts 9:20ff) as do stories of Thessalonika and Beroea (Acts 17: 5 & 13). The Disputes are even to be found amongst the Jesus people (I Cor 10f). Paul is the focus in Syria, Cyprus and the Roman provinces of Asia Minor and the Aegean. He moves from urban centre to urban centre sometime forced by circumstances (Acts 14:4ff) but also by prompts (Acts 16:6-10). Paul keeps in contact with his disciples with messengers and letters often letters in answer to a query. Paul is the only New Testament writer for whom we have an accepted narrative, for the rest we have little if any context. Athanasius in his Easter Letter of 376CE gave initial form to the New Testament canon including many writings attributed to Paul and omitting numerous other writings claiming to be from Paul. Paul was so dominant in the thinking of early Western Christians that writings that were attributed to him that are not now regarded as of his composition. Hebrews is in the canon, but Laodiceans, Macedonians and Alexandrians and 3 Corinthians are not. The current view is that the bulk of the three Pastoral Letters are not written by Paul.¹⁵ Similarly

Most scholars will admit that Ephesians was not composed by Paul himself, and to what extent he explicitly covered with his authority is dubious.¹⁶

Paul his letters and those attributed to him continue to dominate the study of early Christianity. They are a great source of early Christian interpretation and teaching that predate the canonical Gospels.

Luke places the birth of Christ in the time of Augustus. The Empire is still in its infancy. Greece has been incorporated but the Greek language and culture will become dominant, but any social and cultural homogeneity is not yet. Local language and *ides* perdure. A Roman rather than an ethnic identity probably did not emerge before the Antonine constitution of 212CE that gave everyone citizenship. In Iconium the crowd speaks Lycaonian and it is the priests of *Zeus* who want to honour Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:11). Lystra and Philippi were Roman colonies but local ethnicity overlaid by Greek culture is common in many of the towns visited by Paul. It is the towns that Paul frequents. Language did not present an insurmountable problem. In reality the Greek language and the Hellenic culture homogenised the region "most of the cities looked and felt very much alike".¹⁷ The ruins of Perge (Acts 15:26) which rates just one line are far from insignificant. Paul preached there but surprisingly not in Antalya.

As a tent maker like Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1) Paul fits into an urban mercantile class. Lydia of Thyatira one of his converts is in the purple-dye trade (Acts 16:14). These are the successful contacts for Paul rather than the philosophical Athenians. Paul it seems found willing ears in some Jews but also frequently amongst the *God fearers* and particularly amongst traders and merchants. This should not surprise since Peter and Andrew were business men as was Levi.¹⁸ Paul and Silas baptised not just the householder but the whole household of Lydia and the gaoler (Acts 16:14 & 34), Justus and Crispus in Corinth (Acts 18:7ff), which was the custom of Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10). This made Jesus people of not only officials and merchants but also their slaves. The Letter to Philemon indicates that while master and slave both embracing the Jesus cult altered the slave master

¹⁴ In Galatians 2 Paul tells of preaching in *Arabia* and Christians feature in the Quran but there is no evidence of Christians in Arabia until Eusebius 6:20, 37.

¹⁵ Cf. Murphy-O'Connor. Jerome, 1997. *Paul a Critical Life* p 356.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Goodman. p 107.

¹⁸ The myth of poor ignorant fishermen is unsustainable.

relationship it did not abolish it. Titus 3 indicates the acceptance of Roman law and custom.¹⁹ Acts continually notes the number of women who became followers at Thessalonika (Acts 17:4), Berea (Acts 17:12), and Athens (Acts 18:33ff) while Phoebe of Chenchreae is but one of a number of women noted in Romans (16). Lieu notes the similarities between Josephus and Acts in the role of prominent women and goes on to say "the sympathy of powerful women seems to be an threatening way of articulating a combination respectability and independence"²⁰ The followers were from a very mixed backgrounds and social levels. Problems arose from this disparity which will be mentioned later.

The picture in Acts is that in Palestine the early Jesus disciples were those who had seen and heard Jesus. Luke continually notes large number of conversions including (Acts 6:7) number of priests. Luke also notes "you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2; 38). Then he outlines the common usage "these remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles the brotherhood, the breaking of bread and to the prayers (Acts 2:42), this also seems to have included some commonality of ownership (Acts 4:32). Conversation and instruction over a common meal were features of the Jesus ministry.²¹ And the early followers continued this usage. Paul initially spoke in synagogues, seemingly around the work bench and following the baptism of the new disciples instruction often lengthy was linked with a common meal as at Troas (Acts 20:7-12). It was this common meal that exposed rifts in the Corinthian community (1 Cor 11:17). Paul's letter indicates that there were distinctions with what was available to the various groups at the common meal.²² The Pastoral Epistles indicate a diverse and stratified community. 1 Timothy (6:17)²³ has a warning to the wealthy and (5:1ff) advice how to maintain community harmony. James (2) also warns against distinctions between the wealthy and the poor. The instruction *you must love your neighbour as yourself* (James 2:9) has yet to overcome within the community the social distinctions of the wider society.

The early Jerusalem community is pictured as leading a common life (Acts 1:42ff). It has been argued that the well off supported the poorer believers in anticipation of and early return and the Parousia.

The Jeremias version might be more accurate.

Jerusalem in the time of Jesus was already a centre of mendicancy; it was encouraged because alms-giving was regarded as particularly meritorious when done in the Holy city...Jerusalem had already in Jesus' time become a city of idlers, and the considerable proletariat living on the religious importance of the city was one of its most outstanding peculiarities.²⁴

Although the poor are not mentioned in James' letter to the gentiles (Acts 15:22ff) in Galatians Paul writes "The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember the poor" (Gal 2:10) and encourages the Corinthians to be generous (2 Cor 8 & 9). Paul uses the poor in their "natural and material sense"²⁵ and even when planning to go to Spain tells the Romans he must take money to Jerusalem (Rom 15:25). The collection for the poor is constant theme.²⁶ To some extent this concern

¹⁹ The authorship and dates of the Pastoral Epistles is questioned. By Paul, under his authority or by another at a later date but they seem to indicate and early approach.

²⁰ Lieu. Judith M., *Neither Jew nor Greek* p 94.

²¹ Cf. the disciples at Emmaus Lk 24:31.

²² Was this the beginning of "bring a plate"?

²³ Timothy and Titus may not fall within the first fifty years but expose what seems to be an enduring problem,

²⁴ Jeremias quoted in Murphy-O'Connor p144.

²⁵ Cf. Murphy-O'Connor. p 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p 348.

for the Jerusalem believers is in conflict with his advice to the Thessalonians “not to let anyone have food if they refuse to do any work. We hear that some of you are living in idleness, doing no work themselves but interfering with everyone else’s (2 Thess 3:9ff).

The Jewish Scriptures are basic to the thinking of some of the early Jesus community “the scriptures are the assumed starting point;’ it is written’, γέγραπτα, can be repeated without justification”²⁷ in the letter of James and those of Paul. This is in contrast to 1 Peter (4:3-40 which seems to envisage a Gentile audience. However the general opinion is the 1 Peter is 2nd Century CE and not written by Peter and so is outside our area of consideration. An inference can be drawn that during the time or our consideration the Jesus community maintained a strong element of Jewish and God-fearing converts.

The picture presented by Acts, the Pauline Epistles and some others is of growing and vigorous community of believers still heavily made up of Jewish and God-fearing converts, living in a portion of the Roman Empire that was culturally Greek with a substratum of previous ethnicity. While some of the Judean Galilean groups may have been rural, those founded by Paul were urban. Once the problem of the Jewish or gentile observance has been overcome a major cause of friction had been removed. The antagonism towards Paul is however a growing, forcing him to appeal to the Emperor and journey to Rome. The evidence from the early Epistles is however of frictions within the community stemming from social and wealth divisions that intrude from the wider community.

²⁷ Lieu. Judith M., *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* p37.

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