The New Testament teaching on family matters

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Abstract

The article shows that first-century urban Christian communities, such as those founded by Paul, brought in both whole families and individual women, slaves, and others. An example of an early Christian family can be seen in the autobiographical details of the Shepherd of Hermas, whether factual or not. The article aims to demonstrate that the New Testament teaching on family gives two very different pictures: the structured harmony of the patriarchal family as presented in the household codes of Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5, over against the warnings and challenges of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels to leave family in favor of discipleship. The developing devotion to martyrdom strengthened the appeal to denial. **Another version of the essay was published in Horsley, Richard A (ed), A people's history of Christianity, Volume 1: Christian origins, 201-220. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The task of tracing a people's history of the family, or social history from below, in the first decades of the Christian movements poses some particular methodological problems. There is almost no material evidence for Christian life during the first two centuries, and literary evidence is scant, notably the New Testament and other documents of early Christian literature. Meanwhile, there is an abundance of both material and literary evidence for social and family life in the surrounding environment. The majority of it comes from the city of Rome and the nearby sites of Ostia, Pompeii, and Herculaneum,

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though substantial evidence has also been found at a few other sites around the Mediterranean, such as Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Carthage, and the distant site of Vindolanda on the British frontier. One of the interpretive questions is: to what extent is what happened in these locations typical of life elsewhere in the Empire at the same time?

1. FINDING THE PEOPLE

In a people's history of the first decades of Christianity, who are "the people"? The elite families in these societies are fairly easy to identify, and they are a small minority. In the early Empire they consist of three classes: the senatorial order, the equestrian order just below them, and the decurionate or local aristocracy in the provinces. Together they probably did not compose even as much as 5 percent of the population. Do we then exclude these power wielders and shapers of politics and assume that everyone else belongs to the people? This raises the much-debated question of how class and status operated. Class was determined by birth, and status relatively so, though it could change under certain circumstances. Wealth was expected of the upper classes, though, if impoverished, they did not lose their class membership. Status was more heavily dependent on relationships, social networks, and family reputation.

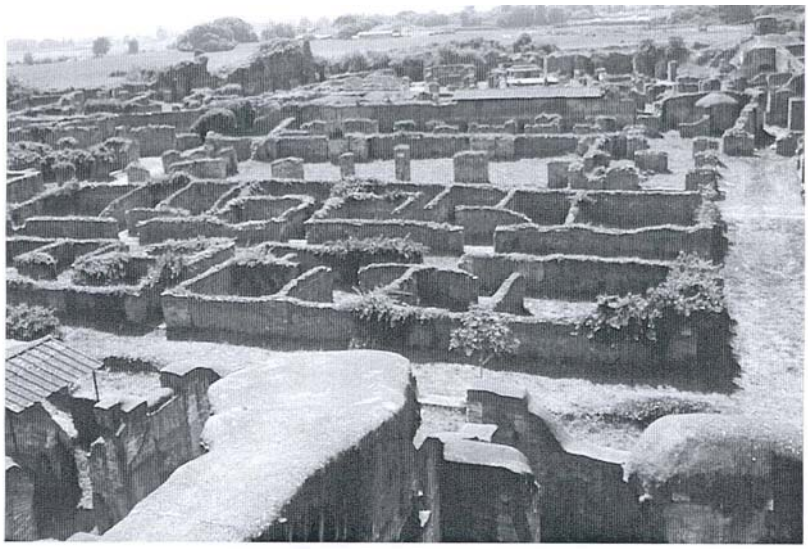

Fig 1 Foundations and first-floor walls of simple four-room apartments at Ostia, second-third centuries CE. Each building contained four such units on the ground floor, all of similar design. A staircase indicates at least a second floor, and there were probably more.

Photo: Carolyn Osiek.

Naming the status of early followers of Jesus is not easy. The one thing agreed upon by scholars is that there is little evidence of elites in the movement until the late second century.[2] That leaves, among others, the rural poor, of whom, outside Galilee, probably few belonged to the Jesus movement, for there is not much evidence – aside from the Gospels, possibly the *Didache,* and Pliny's Letter to Trajan – for a rural mission movement in the early years. Even Philip's mission to Samaria has him sticking to cities and towns (Ac 8:1, 40). The church surely drew from the ranks of the freeborn urban poor and lower classes of the cities, the tradespeople, and the craftspeople. Slaves and freedpersons depended on the households with whom they were associated. Family life of some kind existed in all of these social groupings that were intricately interrelated with one another.

Early followers of Jesus lived not in their own world but the larger world of the Roman Empire. Part of the process of retrieval, therefore, is an effort to reconstruct a picture of the lives of ordinary people in cities of the Empire. Only in this way can we see early Christians in their own context and make some informed judgments about their lives based on what their contemporaries were doing and not doing. At the same time we must take into account the differences that their own writers claimed characterized the members of their movement. Apologists of the second century give the impression that Christians were just like any of their neighbors. Yet early members of the Jesus movement from Paul onwards claimed that they did not do certain things that others did commonly, such as practice divorce or abortion or abandon newborns (1 Cor 7:10-11; *Didache* 2.2; 5.2; *Diognetus* 6; Tertullian *Apology* 6-7, 9). But one wonders why in internal discussion they sometimes needed to place such emphasis on these differences; perhaps it was to convince not-so-convinced followers that these differences needed to be observed.

2. GLIMPSES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

We can learn a great deal from the remains of housing, especially what little is preserved of the lower classes and poorer inhabitants of the cities. The dark, cramped quarters of one- and two-room apartments like those of some multiple-residences buildings of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Ostia, or the small back and upper rooms of shops in places like the main street in Ephesus are examples of the crowded, poorly ventilated, and generally unhealthy conditions in which most of the urban population lived. If such

[2] See further on this topic: E A Judge (1960), *The social pattern of the Christian groups in the first century: Some prolegomena to the study of the New Testament ideas of social obligation*; Richard L Rohrbaugh (1983), "Methodological considerations in the debate over the social class status of Early Christians"; Bruce J Malina (2000), "Social ranking, morality, and daily life".

people cooked for themselves at all, it would have to have been on some makeshift portable apparatus in a nearby outside space. More likely, they bought fresh bread, fruit, and vegetables at local markets and got most of their cooked food from neighborhood vendors and *thermopolia* – the equivalent of fast food restaurants. They ate meat rarely if at all, typically only when present at feasts given by wealthy city patrons. If they bathed, it was in the public baths, apparently open to both men and women. They used public latrines.

Fig 2 Courtyard and only common space of a crowded multi-resident, multi-storied apartment building, known as the *Casa a Graticcio* in Herculaneum, first century CE so called because of its use of a common low-standard method of construction using cemented rubble in wood frames. Such apartment houses were notorious for danger of fire and collapse.

Photo: Carolyn Osiek.

They birthed their children at home with the possible help of a midwife. They were raised in an environment of intimate social relationships and no privacy.

Material remains, of course, cannot tell the whole story. When they are combined with select literary evidence, a picture of everyday life emerges. We know little about the family life of the lower classes in the Roman Empire: it is not at all certain how much legislation affected them, and the letters that yield valuable information about how life was really lived come largely from the elites.