

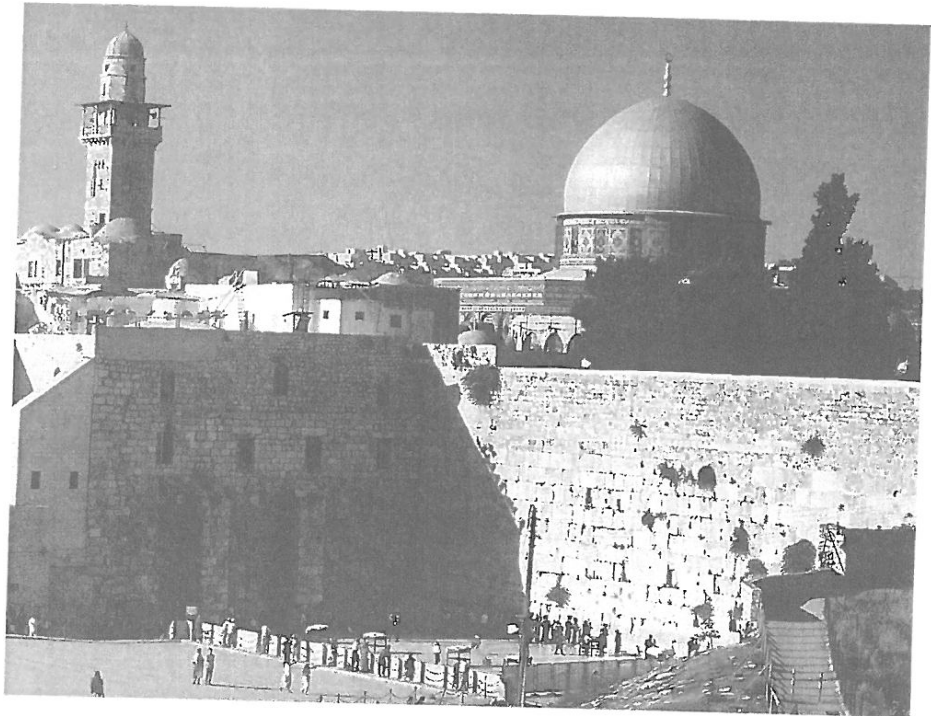


the Court of the Israelites holier still, the Court of the Priests holier still, the area between the porch and altar holier still, the sanctuary holier still, and the Holy of Holies holiest of all (Mishnah *Kelim* 1.6-9). This emphasis on relative holiness was correlated with considerations of relative purity (or ritual cleanness) and, thus, relative status before God. Lepers, for example, were forbidden to enter the walls of a city (Lev 13:46); hence, walled cities were more holy than the outlying areas. As the abode of God, as the link between the human and the divine, and as inviolable territory, the temple provided the center point around which human life was to be oriented. With its system of restricted spaces, the temple brought together the concepts of holiness and relative purity. Gentiles were to be separated from Jews, then, and Jewish women from Jewish men, Jewish priests from non-priests, and the high priest from other priests. In this way, the temple functioned as the center of the Jewish understanding of the world. It served as the center of the social world, defining what would count as appropriate social interaction.⁴

The architecture of the temple thus provided the visible grounds for social inequality distinguishing different levels of competence (fundamentally by virtue

Herod's temple in the model of first-century Jerusalem at the Holy Land Hotel in Jerusalem (Joel Green)

4. This idea of "culture center" has been borrowed from Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charism: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1983) 121-46 (122-24).



The Western Wall ("Wailing Wall") in Jerusalem

of birthright!) to come close to the Holy of Holies, God's dwelling place. The centrality of the temple had as its direct corollary the presumed legitimate power of the High Priest and the leading priestly families; they enjoyed the divine sanction that came from access to the court of priests and the temple itself. To priests more broadly belonged the almost exclusive right to perform sacrifices on behalf of the people, to distinguish clean and unclean, and to handle what was set apart to divine service. In the world of the NT, then, a criticism raised against the priesthood was a criticism of the temple, and a criticism of the temple was a criticism of God.

Given the temple's preeminence, what would it mean for Jesus to speak against the temple? How could the Christian movement claim to represent God's purpose if it did not take with utmost seriousness the authority emanating from God's house? In compromising conventional understandings of pure and impure, clean and unclean, did not those early followers of Jesus compromise the temple and call into serious question the divine underpinnings of the world it served? Such questions were not abstractions for Jesus' disciples in the era between Jesus'

crucifixion and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. With the temple standing, the sacrificial system operative, and the priesthood active, how would Jesus' followers comport themselves with regard to the temple? On what authority would they dissolve the social barriers — between Jew and Gentile, but also between priest and lay, male and female — authorized by the temple itself?

2.3.1.2. *The Scriptures*

The Scriptures were crucial for the self-identity of the Jewish people and for establishing the coordinates of their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Scripture also played a constitutive role in ongoing ethical discourse within Judaism, even if the widely assumed authority of Scripture must be counterbalanced with the diversity of ways in which scriptural texts were employed in such discourse. Pharisees, for example, tended to be more imaginative in their exegesis, Sadducees much less so. Jesus often found himself at odds with his Jewish contemporaries — not on the authority of particular texts but on their interpretation. Similarly, scriptural exegesis in the NT writings, while often recognizably Jewish in form and style, nonetheless often departs from contemporary Jewish interpretation because of Christian preunderstandings related to the relationship of Jesus and/or the church to

The Problem of the "Old Testament"

References to the "Old Testament" or even to the "Scriptures of Israel" employ a shorthand that clouds a series of complex issues related to historical ambiguities. First, before there was a "New Testament," there could not yet be an "Old Testament," strictly speaking. If "Old Testament" is an anachronism, however, it is one hardly overcome in historical discussion by reference to the "Hebrew Bible" or the "Hebrew Scriptures." On the one hand, even if a set of Scriptures had been fixed in a *de facto* sense by the first century CE, as seems likely, this does not mean that a canon of Scripture had been formally established by this time. Of course, NT writings sometimes refer to OT books and texts as "Scripture" (*graphē*), and this suggests that the authority of Scripture was operative even when the parameters of the OT canon had not been established. On the other hand, the use of the expression "Hebrew Bible" in discussions of the early Christian use of the OT founders on the reality that, more often than not, the NT writings employ a Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint [LXX]), available already from the third and second centuries BCE onward.

Which Bible?

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Torah

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Former Prophets

Joshua
Judges
Samuel
Kings

Latter Prophets

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve:
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Writings

Psalms
Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles

THE SEPTUAGINT

Law and History

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel)
2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel)
3 Kingdoms (1 Kings)
4 Kingdoms (2 Kings)
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
1 Esdras
2 Esdras (Ezra-Nehemiah)
Esther
Judith
Tobit
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees
3 Maccabees
4 Maccabees

Poetry and Prophets

Psalms
Odes
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Job
Wisdom (of Solomon)
(Wisdom of) Sirach
(Ecclesiasticus)
Psalms of Solomon
Hosea
Amos
Micah
Joel
Obadiah
Jonah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Baruch
Lamentations
Epistle of Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Susannah
Daniel
Bel and the Dragon

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Pentateuch

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Historical Books

Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

Poetry and Wisdom Books

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

Major Prophets

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel

Minor Prophets

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Israel's ongoing story. The prominent role of the Scriptures in discussion of community identity and ethical formation underscores its legitimating function, even if competing interpretive vantage points meant that different parties might employ the same scriptural texts and images in contradictory ways.

The presence of God in the temple and the purpose of God behind the Scriptures thus became powerful bases for justifying the authority of certain persons (e.g., the High Priest) and the superior status of some persons over others (e.g., Jew versus Gentile). Other sources of legitimization were operative, however, and these were likewise deeply rooted in the collective subconscious of people as they lived out their lives. These shared values are often best brought to the surface in an exploration of particular shared patterns of behavior. In the Mediterranean basin, these would include the central commitment to loyalty and kinship, the relationship between kinship and economic exchange, the web of relationships accorded privilege by the politics of patron-client relations, and the cardinal value of status honor.

2.3.2. (Fictive) Kinship

"Kinship" refers to family relations and alliances; "fictive kinship" broadens this focus somewhat, embracing also those persons who are treated as though they were kin. The first-century world highlighted the role of the community over the role of the individual in a way captured well by the African proverb, "We are, therefore I am." Whereas today someone introducing himself or herself might refer to individual accomplishment, persons in the world of Jesus and Paul might refer instead to their genealogy, their village, their community of reference. Their identities were embedded in their communities, their kin-groups.

The family was the basic social unit of the empire, though by "family" is meant "extended family" or "household" (*domus*). The *domus* included husband, wife, children, slaves, and others living in the house, and this enlarged sense of family had significant repercussions for the expansive authority wielded by the father (*paterfamilias*, the oldest living male ascendant) and for the transmission of wealth and status. The authority of the Roman father was legendary in the Greco-Roman world. At the birth of his children (whether the child was born to his wife or a slave woman did not matter), he was able to determine whether it would be raised within his household or be given up for adoption, sold, or exposed. His legal authority over the child's life and death continued as long as he lived, and to this should be added his rights to scourge the child, pawn the child, allow or refuse the child's marriage or divorce, maintain the child's property as his own, or sell the child into slavery. Happily, a review of the father's *legal* rights is not necessarily a measure of actual practices. In fact, with the onset of the empire this gruesome picture was mollified as fatherly authority began to be grounded more in affection

and devotion rather than cruelty. Nevertheless, tales of physical (including sexual) cruelty are not difficult to locate in the Roman world.

The image of the household was not limited to the extended family. Rome itself was imagined as one household with Caesar as the father of all. This portrait surfaced in the ongoing characterization of the emperor as the sire of his people, their benefactor and savior.

In a father-oriented society like this one, children, like slaves, were among the weakest, most vulnerable among the population. They had little implicit value as human beings, a reality that is perhaps related to the high likelihood that they would not survive into adulthood. Even if women procured their place in the household by bearing children, especially sons, the children themselves were of low status.

Given these realities it may be surprising to find Jesus and NT writers referring to God as father and encouraging the welcoming of children. This is an excellent illustration of how the world in which the NT was written need not be taken for granted within its pages, but might also be qualified, even overturned. An Evangelist like Mark, for example, can undercut authoritarian, father-like practices within the community of believers (e.g., 3:31-34; 9:33-37; 10:13-45), while at the same time portraying God (Abba, Father) as Jesus' intimate and as the one who acts with patience and mercy to bring salvation.

From the classical period images of friendship had been idealized to such a degree that authentic friendship was possible only among social equals who were themselves of sufficient wealth to devote themselves fully to the pursuit of virtue and service. Friendships in this form were to be characterized by mutuality and equality, like-mindedness and mutual affection. More usual in the Greco-Roman world were relationships of a much less idealistic sort, involving intricate webs of obligation. In practice, almost without exception, claims of equality among friends were a charade. As Pliny remarked, someone might have many friends — superior friends, equal friends, lesser friends, and clients — and the cataloging of one's friends into these categories was a function of the relative quantity of their social and economic resources (*Ep.* 7.3.2).

Hence, social nearness and distance — one's social relationships, whether among those who shared blood or who were friends — was symbolized especially in the forms of economic exchange into which people would enter.

2.3.3. Reciprocity and Patronal Piety

The ethics of reciprocity is therefore central to our understanding of social relations in the world of the NT. Two systems of economic exchange are especially characteristic of agrarian life. The first is generalized reciprocity — that is, a transaction charac-

teristic of those who share close kinship ties, whereby the exchange is essentially one-sided, altruistic, the giving of a gift without explicit stipulations for any reciprocation in kind. The second is balanced reciprocity — the direct exchange of goods of approximately equal value within a relatively narrow period of time.⁵

Here, it is important to observe the central role allotted kinship relations, evaluations of social distance and nearness, in everyday life. People in Roman antiquity exhibit a marked concern for determining the boundaries of “our group” and stipulating the nature of appropriate interaction with those outside the group. And how one person behaved toward another economically was a function and symbol of the perceived social relationship between the two. The economic sharing — whether missionary support, almsgiving, or the sharing of community goods — mentioned by various NT voices thus assumes a Christian movement that saw itself as an expanded (fictive) kin-group.

In addition to these two systems of reciprocity, we may refer to the patronage system characteristic of the Mediterranean world — a system of relationships grounded in inequality between the two principals. A patron is one who has resources that are needed by a client. In return, a client can give expressions of loyalty and honor that are useful for the patron.

After the final victory of Octavian in the civil wars, Rome was unified not only under one emperor but also by a political order based on the ethic of patronage. Octavian took for himself the name Augustus, but also other titles. He was *princeps* — that is, the patron of the Roman people. He thus conceptualized the empire as a household indebted to him as its head.

Augustus assumed for himself the role of benefactor, a role that during this period was pervasive throughout the empire. Slaves were indebted to their masters, the *paterfamilias* (i.e., the patriarch of an extended family). Sons were under the rule of their fathers. Clients were bound to their patrons, and often had clients of their own. Patrons shared clients. And so on. Seneca observed that the exchange of favor and services in the Roman world bound together human society (*Ben.* 1.4.2). The resulting web of overlapping obligation spread throughout the empire, ultimately with everyone indebted to the emperor as benefactor — either as a result of his direct patronage as emperor or indirectly through networks of obligation that found their way back to him.

But even the emperor was a client of a sort, for the hierarchy of patronal relations extended beyond the sphere of humans to include the gods. The gods had shown favor to Rome, and especially to the *princeps*, the patron, the emperor. Although he was not always regarded as divine, he was certainly the recipient of divine patronage and served as the special envoy of the gods. Thus, the reciprocity of

5. For these concepts, and especially the relation of kinship distance to reciprocity variation, see Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1972) 185-230.

patronal relations obligated slaves to masters, sons to fathers, the elite to the emperor, and the emperor, together with all of Rome, to the gods.

In this way, the political order, the binding ethic of patronage, was rooted in the divine. The ethic of obligation found its legitimization in the gods themselves. It was sacred.

2.3.4. Status Honor

Finally, the world of the NT is one in which social status and social stratification are vital considerations. This is not to say that people in Roman antiquity were especially concerned with economic class — for example, as a function of one's relative income or standard of living, or as related to one's relationship to the means of production (as in Marxism). Such matters of industrial and post-industrial society have little meaning in the ancient world. Rather, the social world was defined around power and privilege (see Figure 2.1),⁶ and is measured by a complex of phenomena — religious purity, family heritage, land ownership (for nonpriests), vocation, ethnicity, gender, education, and age.

This does not mean that wealth is not a factor in understanding social relations in Roman antiquity. It is, but wealth is not itself the instrument of exchange for securing or advancing one's social position. Wealth was useful if it brought higher status, but it could do so only if it were accompanied by other desirable qualifications. Thus, for example, landed (inherited) wealth was of greater significance than earned wealth, hence the importance of family heritage. Along similar lines, a Jewish priest had high status in his community because he was a priest (assuming he did nothing to jeopardize this standing), an accident of birth, as it were.

The status of Romans was based on the social estimation of their relative honor, the perception of those around them regarding their prestige. One source of honor is *ascription*, a focus on which would suggest that social status is a property of the external world. In this case, honor is ascribed to a person through no merit of his or her own, but is imputed on the basis of one's family heritage, gender, or other inherited attributes (e.g., physical deformities). A second source of honor was *performance*, whereby honor might be gained by means of one's actions — education, marrying well, or other conformity to socially prescribed behaviors. According to texts like Lev 21:16-24 it is evident that priestly communities accorded privilege to ascription, not performance; one was a priest because one was born into a priestly family, but any of a number of inherited physical maladies could lead one to be excluded from the priesthood. According to the NT, the

6. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (2nd ed.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984) 284.

Christian community was to throw open the doors previously closed to those excluded because of low ascribed status. Membership in this new community was not related to factors outside one's control; instead, one could surmount such liabilities voluntarily by reorienting one's life around the lordship of Jesus.

2.4. CONCLUSION

All language is culturally embedded, and the language of NT texts provides no exception to this axiom. The writing of a letter like Paul's to the Galatians, for example, assumes shared knowledge often of an unspoken sort. The sociohistorical realities that shape a people's grasp of the world are often assumed in a discourse. Hence, it behooves the contemporary student of the NT writings to develop as much as possible "insider knowledge" of the taken-for-granted world of the NT.

Specific NT texts often draw on a level of background information not available in a brief introductory chapter of this kind. Hence, in the chapters that follow, more specific and detailed information will be mentioned when necessary. Here we have been able to work on a larger canvas, tracing the historical sweep of the cultural traditions and commitments that coalesce in the NT era. In this way, we have been able to underscore repeatedly the level of tension operative in this world, as well as the degree to which people of this world found their identity in their kinship groups and saw and experienced life as an integrated whole. Clearly, for many people living in the English-speaking world today, our cultural experience is not that of the NT world. If we are to appreciate how the message of Jesus and his followers was "good news," we must develop eyes and ears sensitive to the cultural sensibilities of their world.

FOR FURTHER READING

For historical data, the best single source for the world of the NT is Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). Individual essays on a range of topics related to the world of the NT are available in standard reference works, such as the following:

David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)

Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992)

Gerald F. Hawthorne, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993)

Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997)