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Bendemann, Reinhard von, and Markus Tiwald,
eds.

Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt

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It has become a piece of common wisdom that Christianity, although originating from a rural movement, spread throughout the Roman world mostly as a city religion. This should quite naturally prompt New Testament scholars from highly urbanized Western societies to recognize the city as a worthy topic of research—parallels between urban religious situations in the first and in the twenty-first century are obvious. It is due to this reflection that New Testament scholars living and working in the Ruhr region in northwestern Germany (“Die Megalopolis des Ruhrgebietes,” 7) have focused two conferences (in 2010 and 2011) on the city as the habitat of early Christianity. The papers given at these two conferences are now published in this volume.

In the introduction (9–42), the two editors enter into a critical dialogue with Max Weber’s conception of a “city” (Stadt) and with its reception among sociologists and historians. They suggest an approach to the phenomenon of ancient cities (including the distinction between city and countryside) along several parameters, such as the geographical position, the political constitution, social structures, economy, buildings (contrary to the “definite” state we encounter on excavation sites, ancient cities, too, were constantly subject to change and rebuilding), defense, dependence on supra-urban authorities, legal status, availability of technology, access to education and health care,

religion, and, finally, the idea of *urbanitas*. In all this complexity it becomes clear that to speak of a “city” carries with it a broad range of connotations and implications.

The article by Reinhard von Bendemann (“Jesus und die Stadt im Markusevangelium,” 43–68) goes back to the beginning, to Jesus’ activity in and around Galilee *as narrated by Mark*. Von Bendemann argues that, although much of the narrative is situated in rural regions, Mark, writing for an urban audience, proposes a positive view of cities (the Decapolis, the area of Tyre and Sidon, or Jerusalem) as places of revelation and proclamation. In this sense, cities are “agents of meaning.”

Rainer Riesner (“Zwischen Tempel und Obergemach—Jerusalem als erste messianische Stadtgemeinde,” 69–91) offers an overview of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem before 70 C.E. Based on a rather optimistic reading of Acts together with scattered traditions (mainly preserved by Eusebius) and on Qumran parallels, he describes it as an Essene-like community whose traditions are found, among others, in Luke’s special material and in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1.

Thomas Söding (“Apostel gegen Apostel: Ein Unfall im antiochenischen Großstadtverkehr,” 92–113) understands the Antiochene incident (Gal 2) as peculiar to an urban setting with a strong Jewish community and a certain level of diversity among Christians. It is, according to Söding, not a conflict between city (Paul) and countryside (Peter) but between two cities, Antioch and Jerusalem.

Kurt Erlemann (“Antiochia und der Hebräerbrief—eine Milieustudie,” 114–27) makes the attempt to localize Hebrews with its critical view of the empirical sacrificial cult (among other things) within the theology of the “Hellenists” in Antioch (Acts 6:1–6; 11:19–30), composed in the 60s of the first century. However, he only suggests the *possibility* of an Antiochene context and gathers some arguments *against* a post-70 date for Hebrews, but these indications do not add up to a *positive* argument (the next-to-last sentence: “Und natürlich ist hier nichts zu beweisen” [126]).

With Markus Tiwald (“Frühchristliche Pluralität in Ephesus,” 128–45), the focus turns toward another center of early Christianity. Tiwald states that recent research tends to assume a remarkable plurality among the several early Christian groups in Ephesus at the end of the first century. His test case is Revelation and its way of dealing with the Nicolaitans, presumably urban Christians whose more liberal views on social participation were quite the same as Paul’s. In this regard, the dividing line is not to be drawn between Jews and Christians but between more “liberal” and more “conservative” views in both Judaism and Christianity, each of which had its place in the setting of a large city such as Ephesus.

Jens-Christian Maschmeyer (“Der Glaube auf dem Marktplatz: Freiheitskämpfe in Korinth,” 146–63) takes us one stage further to the next “Pauline” city. He understands the problems discussed in 1 Cor 6–10 as caused by the setting of a Hellenistic/Roman city, yet he mainly elaborates Paul’s conception of freedom in rather philosophical terms and then attaches the conclusion: “Die Stadt mit ihrer ‘weltanschaulichen’ Pluralität wird zum Theologie produzierenden Ort.” (162) Does it?

The contribution by Alexander Weihs (“‘Gott liebt einen fröhlichen Geber’: Zur Strategie und Theologie paulinischer Spendenakquise in Korinth (2Kor 8–9),” 164–88) remains in Corinth. As the title suggests, Weihs gives a thorough analysis of Paul’s arguments in 2 Cor 8–9, where the apostle endows the donations he asks for with theological dignity: they are founded in Christ’s pro-existence and are a tangible sign of unity with the community in Jerusalem.

Jan Schäfer’s paper (“Vom Zentrum zum Zentrum: Die Achse der Apostelgeschichte von Jerusalem nach Rom,” 189–207) fits the design of the volume, since it provides some theoretical reflections on the dichotomy of center and periphery and its use for understanding the conception of space in Acts. In his reading, the narrative of Acts traces the move from one center (Jerusalem) to another (Rome) via several cities, that is, centers with their peripheries, where Christian centers (e.g., Ephesos) are established.

Robert Vorholt (“Alle Wege führen nach Rom: Die Hauptstadt im Blickfeld des Paulus,” 208–18) is less interested in the city of Rome as such but rather in Paul’s missionary strategy as it is expressed in Romans: its focus on Rome follows from Paul’s Roman-imperial conception of space.

Quite the same is true for the contribution by Volker Rabens (“‘Von Jerusalem aus und rings umher...’ (Röm 15,19): Die paulinische Missionsstrategie im Dickicht der Städte,” 219–37). He, too, is more interested in Paul and Paul’s ideas about his mission, but in the latter part he treats Paul’s way of earning his living (by manual labor) as peculiar to a city setting.

Finally, Peter Wick (“Das Paradies in der Stadt: Das himmlische Jerusalem als Ziel der Offenbarung des Johannes,” 238–50) discloses the implications of the city imagery in Rev 21–22. He interprets the end of Revelation in dialogue with Gen 1–11, especially with the rather negative assessments of cities in Gen 4:17 and Gen 11: now the place of salvation is the city. This imagery brings him to the question of continuity. In dialogue with Isa 65, he favors an understanding of this “new creation” as a transformation rather than annihilation and substitution. Thus, his contribution provides in fact a theological assessment of the city.

It is not easy to assess the volume as a whole. All the essays come with rich bibliographies. A good number of them are explicitly focused on the topic of the city (esp. von Bendemann, Tiwald, Schäfer, Wick) and are thus very instructive on the theoretical level as well as in the exegesis of concrete texts. Others have a rather loose connection with the topic of the city and appear more interested, for example, in classical research questions about Paul himself than in the significance of city settings for his mission. With regard to the content of the volume, the title can be misleading: all the contributions remain within the New Testament and the first century, hence they study only one section of early Christianity (“Das frühe Christentum”). Notwithstanding this minor criticism, the reader of this volume encounters a broad range of exegetical approaches to the significance of cities in the New Testament—the life setting of Christians marked by enormous diversity, religious and otherwise, both then and now. Thus, this project is a highly commendable piece of contextual exegesis, this time in a modern “Western” society.