Markus Tiwald /Jürgen K. Zangenberg (eds.)

Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside

Essays on the Urban and Rural Worlds of Early Christianity

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"Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside"

An Introduction to "Essays on Urban and Rural Structures of Early Christianity"

> The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. (Pliny, Letters 10:96,9 from Loeb Classical Library)

That early Christianity, right from its very beginnings, was not a monolithic block, is a truism hardly disputed in recent academic research. Early Christian communities were diverse, dynamic and often enough deeply divided on ethics, persons and doctrine. At the same time, they were creative, very active in communication and eager to exchange ideas with each other. But what does that mean? How did such diversity look like "on the ground"? Instead of dealing with controversial theological positions or leading figures of various Christian groups, this collection of essays deals with Christians in their various urban and rural environments, social worlds that they shared and struggled over with their non-Christian compatriots. By taking such an approach, this book aims to contribute to a broader scholarly debate that puts the social conditions and cultural contexts of local communities into the focus of attention. Early Christians did not exist outside or beyond such socio-historical milieus, just because their belief system and religious practices (partly!) differed, they were – with all their non-conformism – part of their rural and urban environments, so that their convictions and practices needed to *relate* to them. To a large extent, the diversity of regional, local and social milieus provided the basis for the socio-historical and ideological diversity of early Christians. This is, of course, far from propagating any kind of social determinism.

In recent years, we have learnt that the ancient Mediterranean world offered a lot of space for different groups shaping their identity and protecting their

diversity. Along with and often against all social structures, people had choices and found ways to express them. Town and countryside are among the most fundamental conditions of life in the Ancient Mediterranean. Wherever somebody lived with his or her group, in a village in Galilee, a town in Gaul or a city in Galatia, would influence the options and limits this group would be faced with when organizing life in the broadest sense.

This book collects the bulk of papers presented at two conferences devoted to "Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside" and co-organized by the editors.

01.-03. 05. 2017: "Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside: Urban Structures of Early Christianity"; convened by Jürgen K. Zangenberg (Universiteit Leiden) and Markus Tiwald (Universität Duisburg-Essen) at Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden and sponsored by Leiden University.

05.-07. 02. 2018: "Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside: Rural Jesus-Traditions and Urban Christian Beginnings – Contrast or Correlation?"; convened by Markus Tiwald (Universität Duisburg-Essen) and Jürgen K. Zangenberg (Universiteit Leiden) in Essen and funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft).

The conference papers explored ways in which early Christians related to, struggled against, coped with and were inspired by living in an urban or rural environment. Our ambition, perhaps maybe too over-enthusiastic, was indeed to cover as many aspects as possible. Some papers reviewed methodologies and concepts of what we (should or should not) call "urban" and "rural", how we need to perceive their relationship and what methods there are to explore them. Others examined various forms of early Christian community-life in towns and villages in various parts of the ancient Mediterranean, according to how they can still be described on the basis of texts and material culture. And finally, some papers dealt with aspects of how Jews and "pagans" used their urban and rural environments to develop their cultural and social identities.

1. Methodological Reflections

Before going into the detailed exploration of phenomena and milieus, it still seems appropriate to reflect on what we are actually talking about. The first section "'Town' and 'Countryside' – Complement or Contrast?" therefore offers methodological reflections on common concepts and terminologies of "urban" and "rural" in antiquity.

In the opening article "'Urban' and 'Rural' in Early Christianity:

Opposition or Complement?", ancient historian Frits G. Naerebout takes the issue head on, sketches and challenges the popular perception of the first Christians having necessarily been "urban". Using terms like "urban" and "rural", of course, does not only refer to spaces, but "cultural ecologies" (p. 22). Naerebout warns us not to easily rely on the concept of Rome as an "urban empire" when 85 % of its inhabitants lived in the countryside. Demography, therefore, needs to be taken into account when forming a new, more accurate concept of early Christianity. Instead of simply turning the table around and propagating a "rural hypothesis", Naerebout questions how meaningful such labels like "rural" and "urban" can actually be for any description of early Christianity, since for a long period until Late Antiquity, urban and rural living conditions and mentalities were complementary rather than in opposition to each other. The "cultural ecology" of Christian communities is not urban or rural, but is the ecology of the ancient city, which comprises the two.

New Testament scholar Reinhard von Bendemann follows up these questions and examines "Interrelations between Urbanity and Rurality". Starting with Max Weber's and Moses Finley's tendency to put the "consumer city" over against their agricultural countryside, von Bendemann – like Naerebout – quickly emphasizes that not only were "urban" and "rural" very diverse and dynamic structures, but also that they, perhaps apart from a few mega-cities, always remained closely interconnected. This complementary relationship is also reflected in various ways in early Christian literature.

Martin Ebner's article "Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt. Methodisch-hermeneutische Grundsatzfragen und exemplarische Analysen" bolsters this view by additional methodological considerations and providing in-depth case studies. Especially important is Ebner's analysis of Paul's "mental map" that very much depended on imperial provincial structures and the role of cities in it. In much of Paul's activity and organization, cities and elements of urban lifestyle and customs did play a crucial role, either as constructive *models* that Paul creatively adapted or simply imitated, or as *habits* that he thought needed to be overcome or transcended by the local congregation of his fellow believers. Especially political institutions like the *ecclesia* with its ideals of participation and status were of utmost importance. Other NT writings like the Pastoral Letters cultivated other "urban ideals" such as the patriarchal family or the "house", and even Rev cannot imagine the eschatological world, it so desperately longed for, in any other form than an imaginary city descending from heaven, the direct opposition to Rome, the "Great Harlot Babylon". With these analyses, Ebner demonstrates how much the great urban centers of the Roman empire remained an important source of inspiration for early Christian communities, even in cases where some protagonists rejected urban life and ideals.

2. Jesus and the Early Jesus Movement

In the following section "Jesus and the Early Jesus Movement" things are getting more specific. Ever since the "third quest for the historical Jesus" started, Galilean society and material culture have attracted broad scholarly attention as an indispensable source for the reconstruction of the earliest Jesus movement. The traditional perspective on Galilee, however, is currently rapidly changing, and some long-accepted convictions are coming under increasing critique: the old contrast between Judaism and Hellenism in Galilee and the alleged dichotomy between a "rural" versus "urban" Galilee, just to name two. It seems now that Galilee was much more dynamic, and cultural demarcation lines were much more blurred than previously thought.

The latter aspect is extensively discussed in "How Romanized Was Galilee in the Time of Jesus?" by archaeologist Jodi Magness, who reviews the presence of specifically Roman material culture in pre-revolt Galilee, noting an "unexpected Roman influence on the Galilean Jewish population" (p. 124). Magness not only shows how much Galilean local *elites* were attracted by Roman-style architecture and decoration, but – contrary to a broad stream of recent research – also emphasizes that many forms of *common* Galilean household pottery were either derived from Roman forms or were imported. Romanization, therefore, was not a marginal phenomenon of the elite only and nothing forcefully imposed by a foreign oppressor on a subdued indigenous population. Apparently, members of average Galilean Jewish society absorbed Roman eating habits and tastes while at the same time building synagogues and miqwa'ot and using stone vessels to keep ritual purity.

The results of Magness' analysis are directly relevant for Jesus research. Based on a public lecture given at the Essen conference in 2018, Jürgen K. Zangenberg's essay "Walking along the Lakeshore (Mt 4:18): Observations on Jesus the Jew Traveling through a Changing Galilee" reviews characteristics of "Jesus' Galilee" beyond literary constructs and illuminates the first aspect of a revised concept of Galilee as sketched above: its dynamic character. Due to being sandwiched between the urban centers along the Mediterranean coast and southern Syria and its growing integration into the world of the Eastern Mediterranean, Galilean society in the Late Hellenistic and early Roman period was subject to constant transformation that not only affected traditional values and social structures but also settlement patterns. The common distinction between village, town and city is only valid if put into such a dynamic framework: many Galilean villages were growing out into towns, and towns into cities, depending on political, economic and cultural factors. It is significant that many traditions related to the Jesus movement are connected either to locations in the "greenbelt" of cities (e. g., Cana and Nain close to Sepphoris) or were located in thriving towns (Capernaum) that in any case were most dynamic elements of the early Roman Galilean settlement

pattern. Even villages (e. g. NT Chorazim whose identification with current Chorazim is hypothetical) could grow into towns and towns could develop into cities. Such observations help us put the popular assumption into its proper context according to which Jesus had avoided cities because the urban world was alien to him. How much urban culture was Jesus really able to avoid in a Galilee where town and countryside were so close to each other and so heavily interconnected? Approaching Galilee from the perspective of archaeology makes clear that Jesus was active in "a world with a distinct Jewish-urban flavor, integrated into different geographical, economic and cultural frameworks that sometimes overlapped, sometimes collaborated and sometimes clashed with each other" (p. 145).

In "The Rural Roots of the Jesus Movement and the 'Galilean Silence'", Markus Tiwald asks why the cities Tiberias, Sepphoris, and Magdala are not mentioned as destinations of Jesus' preaching in our biblical records. The old assumption that Jesus might have avoided these cities as being too "pagan" certainly is wrong: In Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Magdala, a plethora of Jewish "index fossils" clearly hint to the Jewish identity of these cities. Tiwald reaches the conclusion that Jesus' "selective geographical radius" might be understood as a deliberate prophetic statement for God's advocacy for the poor: "Jesus' world is the world of the marginalized losers (small farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, lepers, and prostitutes). He deliberately disregards the wider focus of Jewish city life and the socially upwardly mobile milieus of those who succeeded in harmonising Jewish and Hellenistic life" (p. 162). Tiwald reckons with a longer time span of Galilean Jesus-followers than the Lukan Jerusalem centrism might suggest. Nevertheless, after the two Jewish wars the Christians most probably had left the Galilee. The birthplace of the Jesus movement was rural – but the place where it grew up was urban.

In "The Transition from Countryside to City. A Transformation of Christianity in its Beginnings?", Gerd Theißen goes one step further and examines the implications of one of the most decisive moments in the history of early Christianity. But did early Christianity really "cross the borderline between city and countryside"? (p. 177) While there is no doubt that early Jesus followers from Galilee went to Jerusalem and from there on to cities elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, other groups would go the opposite way and disseminate Christian faith in rural environments. Especially important is Paul, whose complementary model of ascetism and family ethos made Christianity an attractive alternative in the competition with other cults in the urban world, while the ongoing reception of the Synoptic tradition continued to confront and connect later generations of Christians with their imagined rural Galilean roots. As parallel *and* opposition Christianity paradoxically succeeded in connecting country and city.

Apparently, the lines between the rural and urban worlds were not so clear-cut in Jesus' environment. Galilee was in a dynamic transformation, Jesus himself could hardly avoid getting into contact with urban milieus around

him, and early Jesus followers easily transgressed the borders between rural and urban milieus. Later, traditions with rural *Lokalkolorit* continued to remind urban Christians of a lifestyle different from their own. The considerable ease with which early Jesus followers transgressed geographical, cultural and social boundaries, and their flexibility to adapt to various worlds and milieus certainly also paved the ground for Paul's later missionary work. Two articles in the following section are devoted to him.

3. "Pauline Christianity"

Ever since Wayne A. Meeks' groundbreaking book "The First Urban Christians", the members of Paul's congregations featured as *the* "model first urban Christians". Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte reviews Meeks' theory and Thomas A. Robinson's critique on Meeks in "Pauline Christianity as an Urban Phenomenon". While Robinson is able to nuance Meeks' model in various important points, Lietaert Peerbolte ultimately holds on to Meeks and concludes that "Christianity started in the Greco-Roman world as an urban phenomenon, but city and countryside were related and thus the movement spread from the cities into the more rural areas" (p. 206). "Nascent Christianity was influenced by its urban context at least with regard to its living conditions, the examples according to which it modelled its social organization, probably also its rituals, and the ways in which Christians educated their children." (p. 207).

But how does "Pauline Christianity" look like on the ground? How were communities structured and traditions transmitted? Lukas Bormann takes up a topic that has received much welcome attention in recent years through archeological and exegetical work: "Early Christians in the Lycus Valley". Though there is hardly a chance to write a history of Christian presence in this thriving and complex region around the cities of Kolossai, Hierapolis and Laodikaia, new, especially epigraphical, sources allow us to better grasp how Pauline and non-Pauline Christians positioned themselves in an urban, deeply Hellenized environment with their message that recognized ethnic and social diversity, but desired to overcome it.

4. Early Christian Environments from the First to the Second Century

In the next section "Early Christian Environments from the First to the Second Century", we take the step beyond the alleged core figures and milieus of early

Christianity, Jesus and Paul, beyond the confines of the canon and even the eastern Mediterranean.

In "Urbanity in the Gospel of John?", Jörg Frey examines the role John's gospel and the Johannine tradition might have played in Christianity's transition from – to put it bluntly – a Jewish sect to a universalistic religion. What can we learn from John about "rural" – "urban" relations in early Christianity? Far from being just a mirror of its extra-textual world, John nevertheless provides valuable insights if one looks at the potential context in which the Gospel was written, references to the rural and urban worlds in the narrative and the "intellectual milieu presupposed by the Fourth Gospel" (p. 234). Looking at this evidence, Frey is able to cautiously sketch "the world the Johannine group encountered, partly by rejection, but partly also by education and participation" and the distinct milieu which "might have brought about the type of interpretation, the depth of metaphorical connections, and the degree of liberty with regard to historical traditions that we can find when reading the Fourth Gospel" (p. 248).

Not all early Christian authors and milieus, however, would embrace urbanity so emphatically as John appears to have. Tobias Nicklas and Luigi Walt examine "Anti-Urban Sentiments in Early Christianity? Revelation and the Ascension of Isaiah". Next to some very early indications in early Christian ascetic milieus of at least "a certain distance to aspects of life in an ancient city" (p. 252), the book of Revelation certainly offers the most outspoken polemics against urban life. Strangely enough, this book at the same time demonstrates that one does not need to live in a rural context to develop "anti-urban sentiments", or at least "betray a certain distance to aspects of life in an ancient city" (p. 252). Although the seer resides on the remote island of Patmos when writing his apocalypse, his addressees are congregations living in the big cities along the western Asia Minor coast and its immediate hinterland. But how representative is his prophetic voice in an area where many Christians lived in these cities and shared a more "Pauline" outlook? The situation might be a bit different in the case of *AscIs* whose protagonist Isaiah is said to have withdrawn into the desert to watch and castigate the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem which have both fallen under the rule of Satan. Here, too, we might have the voice of a lone elite ascetic warning his readers about the ubiquitous temptations of urban life. It is important to note that each author's position is deeply rooted in and eloquently expressed by references to the OT-tradition, building up a high aura of authenticity and authority that did certainly not fail to have an impact on their readers. But how representative were these complicated texts for assuming an early Christian "anti-urban sentiment" in the end? Are they more than exceptions confirming the rule that, by the end of the 1st c. / beginning of the 2nd c., Christianity had in fact very predominantly become "urban"? And where were the "rural" Christians?

In his article "Pliny and the Expansion of Christianity in Cities and Rural Areas of *Pontus et Bithynia*", Markus Öhler takes us to a province north of the

"main regions" of Christianity in Asia Minor. While the region is mentioned in the NT, *Pontus et Bithynia* has above all received attention due to Pliny the Younger's famous letter in *Ep.* X 96 and Trajan's reply X 97. After having presented a very detailed commentary on *Ep.* X 96 and scrutinizing other sources for presence of Christians, Öhler provides us with a fascinating sketch of the difficulties early Christian groups faced when taking foot in an urban context. Contrary to the huge role especially Pliny's letter has played in research, our literary and epigraphical evidence does not firmly point to the direction that Christianity was widespread until the end of the 3rd c. and even beyond. Nevertheless, there were Christians and they were not hidden. Where they had come from, we do not know, and it seems likely that they did not only live in cities when Pliny took action against them in the early 2nd c.

One of the earliest Christian communities in the west of the empire could be found in *Lugdunum* (Lyon, capital of Tres Galliae) and *Vienna* (Vienne, a major city in Gallia Narbonensis), attested by Eusebius quoting from a letter that the Lyonnaise Christians sent to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia to report about bloody persecutions they had suffered from their fellow inhabitants. As Karen P.S. Janssen shows in her article "'All Turned on Us Like Beasts'. Legal Negotiation and the Persecution of Lyon and Vienne", this gruesome event documents both the level to which Christians had become part of urban culture in the late 2nd c. *and* how much Christians were still perceived as outsiders by their fellow inhabitants, could be marginalized and even targeted as scape goats by an aggressive mob. Both the relatively large number and visibility of Christians and the often violent reactions by their compatriots against them impelled Roman authorities to take a stance, something that we have already seen in the case of Pliny's investigations against Christians in Pontus et Bithynia. Janssen carefully examines the legal and procedural measures the various groups of city and provincial officials took (or did not take) to achieve their goal, namely to preserve public order. For that purpose, these officials often had to work out fragile compromises between various groups of "stake holders" such as local populace, local officials, provincial officials and not the least also the imperial administration which more often than not was inclined to keep these conflicts to the local level. Negotiations and finding compromises are, if one remembers Ebner's reflections on the *ekklesia*, themselves "urban" skills and virtues. It is tragic, therefore, that "urban Christians" all too quickly got into the danger of falling victim to an environment they themselves increasingly found attractive.

Heidrun E. Mader, on the other hand, examines several Montanist traditions as expressions of "rural Christianity". Poor and oppressed, Montanists intentionally marginalized themselves as "the small ones", making God even bigger and hope for a reversal of their situation even stronger. Though Montanists polemicized against the temptations of urban culture and focused on an imaginary "heavenly Jerusalem" descending onto earth at the villages of Pepouza and Tymion (of all places!), their dream of salvation is

ultimately directed towards a holy *city* cleansed of all impurity and injustice. Mader shows how difficult labels such as "rural" and "urban" actually are, and that not only the "real" but also the "imagined" world needs to be taken into account. The thin line between them can easily be crossed from either side.

5. Beyond Christianity

There might certainly have been good reasons to put the last section "Beyond Christianity" already at the beginning of this book. In the end, the decision to conclude the book with a glimpse into aspects of urban life beyond early Christianity was taken because of the broader chronological scope the last three articles offer compared to most of the articles presented in sections 1–4. The articles in this section should not, however, be read as a kind of appendix on the "cultural surroundings" of early Christianity (in the sense of the German word "Umwelt"). Instead, they deal with the world Christianity was an inseparable part of; Christianity cannot be analyzed as something "outside" of these worlds.

"City", of course, never was and never is a monolith. Cities are segmented into areas and zones, depending on the people who live in them. Often, research has been focusing on the "center" of a city, marked as special by monumental architecture and a prominent location. In "Gods in the Neighborhood: Proximate Religion in the Roman Empire", however, Daniel Schowalter examines "ways in which public religion could become part of the everyday lives of people who were not necessarily seeking it in designated 'cultic' areas found in the middle of the city" (p. 337). The gods, Schowalter shows with the help of numerous examples from Asia Minor, were everywhere, so it was very difficult for a group that rejected these gods to find space for performing their own rites.

Günter Stemberger examines "The Urban World of Rabbis in post-Bar Kochba Palestine", critically reviewing the popular assumption that Rabbis were predominately a rural or small-town phenomenon. "To some extent", Stemberger says, "the rabbinic movement was from its very beginnings an urban movement" (p. 365). But in what sense were Rabbinic centers such as Javne, Sepphoris or Lydda "cities"? And in what way did the culture of these places influence Rabbinic "social, intellectual and religious life" (p. 371)? It is interesting to see that the Rabbis apparently found a way to accommodate the Roman, predominately pagan urban environment, unlike some Christians who sometimes fiercely polemicized against urban life (see, e.g., the contributions of Nicklas / Walt or Mader above). Compromise and cooperation were made halakhically possible, because local elites and Roman officials provided the room to allow Rabbis to be active teachers and to facilitate social advancement of themselves and their congregation:

intellectual exchange, education and identity formation flourished under Rabbis in their urban environments.

A stimulating pendent to Stemberger's article from the field of material culture studies is Ze'ev Weiss' "Urban and Rural Synagogues in Late Antique Palestine. Is There That Much of a Difference between Them?", the last contribution to this volume. Weiss focuses on architecture, orientation, liturgical furnishings and mosaic art. Given the general diversity and regionality of synagogues in Late Ancient Palestine, Weiss states that rural synagogues did not differ much from their urban counterparts and above all, were not poorer in terms of decoration and architecture. It appears that rural congregations were quite open to urban influences. The only notable difference is the fact that Aramaic is much more frequently used in rural contexts than Greek, though inscriptions did not differ in terms of content. The language preference, however, might be an effect of factors beyond the world of the synagogues specifically.

6. Acknowledgements

"Town" and "Countryside" – Complement or Contrast? Methodological Reflections

Frits Gerard Naerebout

'Urban' and 'Rural' in Early Christianity: Opposition or Complement?

1. Early Christianity: The Urban Hypothesis

It is a recurring assertion that ancient Christianity was from the days of its formation a primarily urban phenomenon – to be understood in the sense that the majority of early Christians were town dwellers. One of the most influential advocates of this hypothesis, W. H. C. Frend, stated unequivocally that Christianity, with the exception of Phrygia, was an urban phenomenon, and from the second century A.D. onwards ever more so. Only in the second half of the third century Christianity started penetrating into rural areas – but large pockets remained unaffected for a long time to come.[1] More or less the same is said by luminaries such as Henry Chadwick, Peter Brown, Ramsay MacMullen and Robin Lane Fox, followed by a great many others.[2] After the publication of Wayne Meeks' *The First Urban Christians*, the urban nature of early Christianity has become a matter of fact, repeated by most textbooks, and indeed across the literature on the socio-economic basis of early Christianity.[3]

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1 Frend, W. H. C., "The Winning of the Countryside", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (1967), 1–14; Frend, W. H. C., "Town and Countryside" in Baker, D. (ed.), *The Church in Town and Countryside* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 27–42. In Frend's view, the small pockets of rural Christians are the breeding ground for minority unorthodox prophetic movements. Cf. n.6.

2 Robinson, T. A., *Who Were the First Christians? Dismantling the Urban Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14–8. Add: Walton, S./Trebilco, P. R./Gill, D. W. J. (eds.), *The Urban World and the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017). From Robinson one could get the impression that the adherents of what he calls the "urban thesis" (and the few dissenting voices), are all Anglo-Saxon. But the "urban thesis" is also there in German scholarship: e.g. Andresen, C., *Die Kirchen der alten Christenheit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 17–24; Plümacher, E., *Identitätsverlust und Identitätsgewinn. Studien zum Verhältnis von kaiserzeitlicher Stadt und frühem Christentum* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1987), 8, very outspoken: "wohl aber ist das Christentum bis weit in die zweite Hälfte des 3. Jahrhunderts hinein so gut wie ausschliesslich in und in erheblichem Masse auch von der kaiserzeitlichen Stadt geprägt worden – es wurde seiner ganzen Erscheinung nach zu einer zuvörderst städtischen Religion."

3 Meeks, W. A., *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). As is so often the case, the numerous epigones are rather less nuanced than Meeks himself. In the preface to the second edition (2003) of *The First Urban Christians*, Meeks seems to emend much of the "urban thesis", even if earliest Christianity is still excepted: "Indeed, studies of the relation between cities and the agricultural territory around them even in modern 'developing' societies can offer important insights and lines of inquiry into the symbiosis between rural and urban parts of the Roman Empire. I have perhaps emphasized too much the conflicts, real enough, between the *polis* and the *chora* in antiquity, and not enough their inter-

Rodney Stark built his whole analysis of the growth of early Christianity on the urban hypothesis which he derived from Meeks – as witnessed by the title of his second book on the matter, *Cities of God.*[4] Opposing voices were few.[5]

Of course, the importance of this lies not merely in locating early Christian communities in a spatial sense, but also, and more importantly, in showing that it was a specifically urban "cultural ecology" within which early Christianity throve.[6] While it is obvious that its environment, whatever it was, will have influenced the way in which early Christianity evolved, we should question the received wisdom that this environment was essentially urban.

2. Questioning the Urban Hypothesis: Demographics

"Early Christianity is an essentially urban phenomenon": an easily repeated phrase, but which underlying questions had to be answered in order to come to that conclusion? And have they been asked? When we start peeling all this apart, we end up with a whole set of extremely complicated questions that usually have gone unanswered – more often than not because they were not asked in the first place. How much of the ancient world was urban and how much rural? What do we actually understand by "urban" and "rural"? How many Christians were there and where did they live? Was early Christianity indeed a mainly urban phenomenon, as has so often been stated? If a certain

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dependence. One could usefully enlarge upon the connections between town and country, though it becomes more important for the spread of Christianity a century or so later than it is for the Pauline era." (ix). The contributors to Still, T. D./Horrell, D. G. (eds.), *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), hardly deal with the "urban thesis" explicitly: it is taken for granted.

4   Stark, R., *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). See Robinson, *Who were the first Christians?*, Appendix B, 243–52.

5   Robinson, *Who were the first Christians?*, 21–3. Again, we can add German voices: Wischmeyer, W., *Griechische und lateinische Inschriften zur Sozialgeschichte der Alten Kirche* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 2018), 21; Wischmeyer, W., "Perspektiven frühchristlicher Kunst für die Geschichte der Kirche", *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 79 (1984), 145–62, 149–50. But Wischmeyer only disputes the "urban thesis" for the 3rd century. Much more incisive in their criticism are Bendemann, R. von/Tiwald, M., "Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt – Einleitung und Grundlegung" in Bendemann, R. von/ Tiwald, M. (eds.), *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 9–42. Robinson should definitely have mentioned their work which preceded several of his arguments, but probably he was not aware of it.

6   Everett Ferguson notes in his *Backgrounds to Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) that "a friend facetiously suggested 'cultural ecology' [to replace the ambiguous 'backgrounds']". It is, however, a serious and useful concept dating from the 1950s. In early Christian studies "ecology" was already used by Frend, W. H. C., "The Ecology of the Early Christianities," in Irvine, G. (ed.), *Christianity in its Social Context* (London: SPCK, 1967), 15–28.

percentage of Christians lived in an urban environment, and a certain percentage in a rural environment, does that matter? Is there any argument to support the notion that religion in an urban environment is *sui generis?* What then is the relationship between "urban" and "rural" environments? Did early Christians themselves differentiate between urban and rural environments? If they did, who are *we* to contradict them (if we would feel impelled to do so)?

I will refrain from discussing how to distinguish early Christians from non-Christians and how to count them, and concentrate on the urban-rural dichotomy.[7] In judging the degree of urbanization of ancient society, we first have to agree on what is "urban" and what is not, and to arrange for some quantification. This question is all-important – because when we do not agree on this, we do not have much of a common basis on which to discuss any other related issues.

Many scholars have been debating the definition of a "city" (meaning a town in my present vocabulary[8]), getting hot under the collar about issues such as population size, population density, population make-up, lay-out, the presence of certain amenities, and legal status. Important issues all, but trying to fit them into a universally valid definition is nothing but a waste of time: a definition is a tool, relatively arbitrary.[9] We should not be discussing the definitions themselves, but the outcomes when we apply them.

'Urban' I here understand to refer to any nucleated human settlement of some size – some size would mean hundreds of inhabitants or more, with part of the urban work force employed in non-agricultural occupations. This might not be a very useful definition for our hyper-urbanized world with numerous mega-cities, but it works very well for the ancient world where most nucleated settlements would have been small, counting their population in hundreds or thousands, but only rarely in tens of thousands or more. Their actual size and their density depend, obviously, on both geography and chronology: some areas have more nucleated settlements than others, and of course the

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7 For the issue of that other dichotomy, Christian versus non-Christian, see note 15 below.

8 In this paper I will distinguish between "city" which consists of the unity of the urban centre and the surrounding territory, and "town" for the urban core. This use of city and town was used (introduced?) by Robin Osborne in his *Classical Landscape with Figures: the ancient Greek city and its countryside* (London: George Philip, 1987), 11. Cf. von Bendemann and Tiwald, *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt*, 12 on the conceptual problem: "wie beschreibt man methodisch, was denn überhaupt eine 'Stadt' (mit ihrem Territorium!) im Unterschied zum 'Umland' bzw 'Land' ist/sein soll?" Nowadays, in so-called settlement hierarchies, town and city are seen as standing in a hierarchical relationship to one another, but in everyday language the two are often used interchangeably (and in many languages, there is just one word for "town' and "city": *stad, Stadt, by*, etc.). For the Greek and Latin vocabulary, cf. note 17 below.

9 If at all possible, one should remain close to natural language usage. See Naerebout, F. G., *Attractive performances. Ancient Greek dance: three preliminary studies* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997), 151, 155–8, on definition theory. Looking for cross-culturally valid definitions is a thankless task: thus density (nucleation) works very well for the ancient world, but could not be applied cross-culturally because of the existence of so-called dispersed cities.

percentage of the total population living in such settlements will have changed over time. It would also seem that most authors who defend the "urban thesis" depart from a very general, but workable, idea of what an ancient urban settlement is, quite comparable to what is suggested here – though often not articulated at all.

Of course, there are huge problems in the way of quantification: how many town-dwellers were there – which means establishing the number and the population size of actual towns, and to what percentage of the total population this adds up – which means establishing the population figure for the Roman empire as a whole. We will never be able to overcome these problems, but we might feel confident in making some guestimates – on a somewhat more secure footing than before because of the ERC funded "Empire of 2000 cities" project directed by Luuk de Ligt at Leiden University.[10] In a Roman empire with some 60 million inhabitants, the most urbanized regions, such as Egypt or Campania, will reach the 20 percent mark, the least urbanized will be 10 percent urban or less – an overall degree of urbanization of 15 percent seems reasonable enough.[11] This is within the range of earlier attempts, though on the high side, the Leiden project having uncovered rather more towns existing simultaneously than previously known. The implication of the figures just mentioned is of course that 85 percent of the population of the empire did *not* live in nucleated settlements of some size, and thus are a rural population. The so-called "empire of cities" was above all a rural empire.

Now we come to the whereabouts of the early Christian communities. It seemed to me *a priori* impossible to square the supposedly dominant urban nature of pre-Constantinian Christian communities with an 85 percent rural population, because if you take the number of Christians, usually put at some 10 percent of the total population towards the end of the third century, and the number of town dwellers, here put at around 15 percent, you cannot have all of these Christians, or a majority of them, living in an urban environment. Nobody will accept the idea that a majority of town dwellers in the second and third centuries AD were Christians. This is very simple arithmetic, but

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10 *An empire of 2000 cities: urban networks and economic integration in the Roman Empire* (https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/108209/factsheet/en; accessed 10-12-2019). Of course, the goals of this project go far beyond the basic counting of cities and their urban populations, see Ligt, L. de/Bintliff, J. (eds.), *Regional Urban Systems in the Roman World, 150 BCE – 250 CE* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

11 60 million is the most quoted figure – since Beloch presented it in the 19th century (he later revised it upwards). There have been many guestimates since, often with huge margins, but the averages always end up in the 60 to 70 million range. My own (unpublished) attempts at estimating the carrying capacity of the Empire led me to believe that 60 million is about right. The degree of urbanization derives from private conversations with Luuk de Ligt. Wilson, A., "City sizes and urbanization in the Roman Empire" in Bowman, A./Wilson, A. (eds.), *Settlement, urbanization and population* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 161–95, 193 rightly stresses that the degree of urbanization one finds acceptable implies differing pre-suppositions about the economy of the Roman Empire.

apparently nobody thought of doing the figuring. I wanted to do it, but someone beat me to it: Thomas A. Robinson, whose study titled *Who Were the First Christians? Dismantling the Urban Thesis*, was published well before I could first present my figures.[12] Robinson challenges what he calls "the consensus view of the urban character of early Christianity". He does so by demonstrating that almost every scenario for reconstructing the growth of early Christian communities is mathematically improbable and, in many cases, impossible, unless a rural dimension is factored in. One cannot have the towns of the empire inhabited by only Christians, by a Christian majority, or even a very sizable minority. Nobody will accept such figures for the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire – they cannot be supported when we look at the evidence, textual and archaeological, for the health of ancient polytheism and the relative marginality of ancient monotheism across the empire. A solution to our problem would be to suppose a far higher degree of urbanization, but then we would need more and larger towns which simply are not there. Another solution would be to substantially lower the number of Christians, to a figure as low as between 1 and 4 percent. There we run into problems as well: again the evidence, for instance the number of bishoprics, can hardly be squared with so low an estimate. The conclusion seems to be, inescapably so, that as many or more Christians lived in the countryside as there were living in towns.[13]

3. Questioning the Urban-Rural Dichotomy

Does this matter? For those who have concluded that its urban environment has made early Christianity into a specifically urban phenomenon, and that we should distinguish between the development of this dominant urban Christianity, considered as the main stream, and the minority divergent rural Christianity or Christianities, as Frend put it, the obvious answer is: yes, this matters very much! If Christianity can be shown to be in large part rural, we will have to rewrite early Christian history.

We need not come up, however, with a new 'rural hypothesis' or rethink everything we think we know about the development of early Christianity.

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12 I have to thank the March 20, 2017 blogpost by the much-lamented Larry Hurtado, who passed away November 25, 2019 around the time I was finalizing this passage, for first bringing Robinson's book to my attention; see https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/who-were-the-first-christians/ (accessed 11-12-2019).

13 Strong criticism of Robinson was formulated by Philip Jenkins in his October 30, 2017 blogpost *The First Christians and the Urban Thesis* (https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2017/10/first-christians-urban-thesis/, accessed 10-12-2019) with a reaction by Robinson that shows the robustness of his arguments. Robinson's work is indeed "paradigm-shifting" (James R. Harrison, https://www.amazon.com/Who-Were-First-Christians-Dismantling/dp/0190620544, accessed 10-12-2019) and I cannot see any way around it.