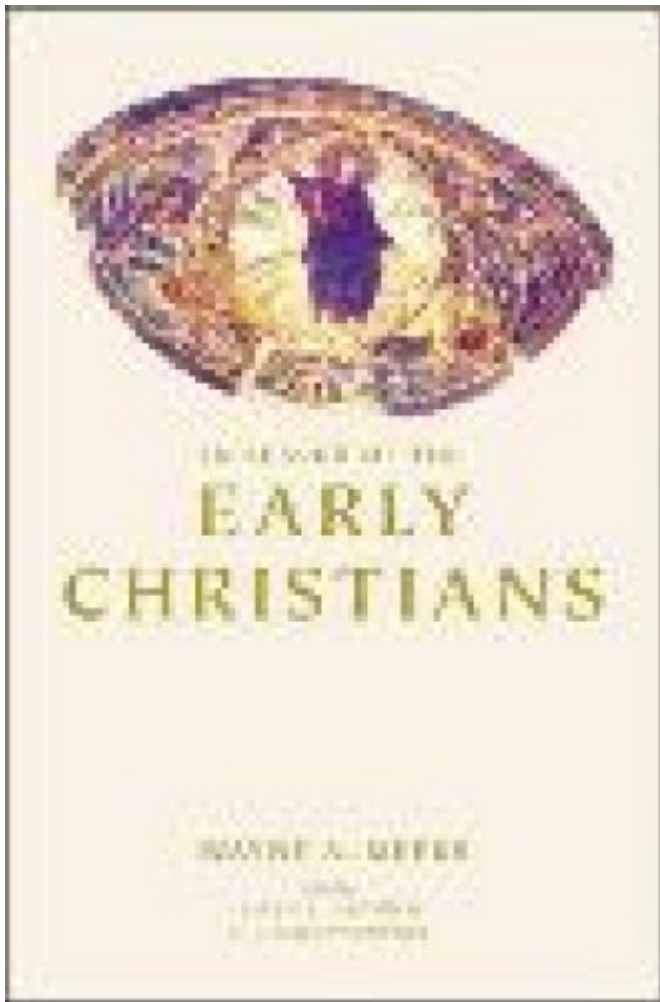


Jesus people

By [Bruce J. Malina](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

In Review



In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays

Wayne A. Meeks
Yale University Press

Over the past three decades Wayne A. Meeks has investigated the social world of the early followers of Jesus. "The emphasis on the social context of writing and

meaning . . . has been perhaps the principal theme of my scholarship,” notes Meeks, professor emeritus at Yale. He has always defined himself as a social historian whose goal has been “to discover how the world was subjectively experienced” by various early Jesus followers, and to describe what emerges “if we try to imagine ourselves into the position of some ordinary person in a Roman provincial city who is converting to Christianity in the first or second century” (*The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*).

The outcome of his efforts has been extraordinarily interesting. In *The First Urban Christians* (1983) Meeks tells the story of Jesus groups founded by Paul, focusing on their “urban” environment, their social life and the formation of their *ekklesia*, governance, ritual, patterns of belief and patterns of life. This work was followed by *The Moral World of the First Christians* (1986), a book that underscores Meeks’s abiding interest in the moral values and attitudes of these early generations. He begins the story with a description of the social setting and of the great traditions of Greece, Rome and Israel expressed in it, then looks at early Jesus group morals within that setting. He takes up this theme again in *The Origins of Christian Morality* (1993) in which he considered morality and its implications for community, conversion, city and household, the world, mutual obligation, the experience of evil, the body and worthiness.

In his latest volume, which brings together essays from previous works, he muses on how the opening essay, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” met a surprisingly large and favorable response, and “encouraged me both to try to discern other dimensions of the Johannine group’s history (‘Equal to God’) and to explore different uses of similar imagery in other Christian groups (‘The Man from Heaven in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians’). The essay ‘Breaking Away’ attempted to make some more general comparisons, while ‘On Trusting an Unpredictable God’ explored some of the theological implications of the apostle Paul’s wrestling with the identity of the communities he had founded. Directly or indirectly, however, the question of the various Christian groups’ continuity and discontinuity with the variety of ways Jews [sic] inhabited the Greco-Roman world is a constant motif in all the essays below.”

Meeks’s concern with Jesus group morality derives from his valuable insight that “ethics and community formation seemed more the immediate point than doctrine, for example, [in] Paul’s letters. . . . Despite the many books that continue to be published on the topic, ‘New Testament ethics’ is a misleading category, confusing

historical constructions with normative judgments, eliding difficult questions about the nature of a scriptural canon, and above all failing to take with sufficient seriousness the dialectic between the formation of a community and the development of the community's norms of belief and behavior."

To understand and assess Meeks's contribution to New Testament studies we need to place his work in a broader context. When people think of "sociology and the New Testament," it is Meeks's name that first comes to mind. Many people still call the social-historical approach to New Testament documents "sociology," largely due to inattentive translations from German (German "soziologisch" means both "social" and "sociological"). Social history came to be called "sociological history" or simply "sociology." Yet the sociology in social history is worlds apart from what is taught as sociology in U.S. colleges. This is only one of the linguistic casualties that clutter biblical studies.

Since meanings come from social systems, it seems extremely anachronistic to refer to pre-Constantinian Jesus groups as "Christians" and to their ideology as "Christianity." After all, Christendom, the matrix of all existing forms of Christianity, is rooted in Nicea and its creedal canons. The word "Jew" is also used anachronistically, given that all Jews today derive from the fifth- to sixth-century Talmudic expression of one strand of Israelite ideology and behavior. There were no Jews in this sense in the world of Jesus and Paul. But social historians rarely attend to such anachronistic usages.

Further, on the basis of the data they employ and the stories they tell, the works of 19th-century novelists and social historians are hard to differentiate. Once we start to think of the problems and questions behind apparently self-evident notions like "history," we can see that our seemingly straightforward distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is relatively modern. Distinguishing works as fact or fiction is a social judgment, a judgment derived from criteria rooted in one's social system. These criteria are usually called "historical criticism," the marshaling and interpretation of data in terms of the historian's intuitive faculties and individual genius, hence without explicit generalization or concern for theory. Both social novelists and historians use their own version of "historical criticism," the one to tell a nonanachronistic fictional story, the other to tell a nonanachronistic factual story. But how can one tell the difference between the two? Footnotes alone do not solve the problem.

Social historians proceed in the same way as 19th-century novelists, and both differ from historians who base their work on the social sciences. The social historian's conceptualization tends to be implicit, arbitrary and unsystematic, while social-scientific historians use explicit and systematic models. Further, because human beings see patterns in whatever they analyze, social historians believe that their historical sources provide some sort of narrative pattern to which data can be related. Hence social historians tend to evade theoretical issues. They prefer not to deal with the underlying social structures and presuppositions that undergird their sources. Instead they focus on intuitively interpreted events and personages.

The problem with this is that ancient authors were high-context communicators. They simply did not spell out all that a historian might need to know in order to reconstruct an event and its actors. Consequently, it is difficult to tell whether the historian's story is imaginative or imaginary.

In contrast, the social-science approach seeks structural and cultural contexts for personages in the past by studying the actual behavior of contemporary people with similar social structures, values and human types. Logically, it makes more sense to argue from what actually exists today to what might have existed in the past, than to argue from what might have existed in the past to what certainly existed in the past. To understand ancient tribal systems, one must begin by understanding present tribes. To understand ancient life in ancient cities, one must look at life in contemporary preindustrial, administrative cities. To understand ancient preindustrial village life, one must study contemporary preindustrial villages.

To me, this approach is the touchstone for assessing the difference between fact and fiction in history. The core question is: Does the description of ancient people's behavior ring true when we compare it to the way contemporary people behave in a similar cultural area? It is highly likely, given the state of our evidence, that people in antiquity behaved much the same as people in similar cultural circumstances behave today. After all, human social structures are actually quite limited. Individuals may be unique; social structures are not.

In the world of biblical studies and historical theology, explorations of the social dimensions of early Jesus group members and their scriptures have taken four different shapes, as Ralph Hochschild suggests. According to Hochschild, two of these emphasize the contemporary relevance of ancient Jesus group behavior, while two deny such relevance. Two of these approaches use social-historical methods,

and two use explicit social-scientific models, one rooted in the social-philosophical interpretation of data, and the other rooted in social-scientific interpretation.

History based on social-philosophical interpretation (relying on social philosophers such as Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Karl Marx) tells its story by comparing social groups while employing sociology, that is, principles of social behavior derived from one's own society. This method implicitly is guided by the social system of the interpreter. For example, Weber's picture of Jesus as charismatic leader presents (as was noted already in the 1930s) a Teutonic, not a Mediterranean, type. In this framework, ideas are often personified and are said to have a "sociology"—for example, a sociology of knowledge, of science, of music and the like.

For the most part, the application of explicit sociological models to the past simply reveals what past peoples would be like if they lived today. The modern sect model applied to first-century Jesus groups makes them appear as sects. Modern sociology of religion outfits ancient groups with the same features as modern religious organizations (e.g., Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996). Marxist liberation theology would have us find liberation theology in antiquity. The practical value of this approach is that it readily appropriates and recontextualizes early Jesus groups to make them relevant as models for today's church.

History based on the social-scientific interpretation of data is based on historical information along with comparative sociology and social psychology, cultural anthropology and any other cross-cultural methods that produce models based on inductive studies. The interpreter makes explicit his or her own social system in comparison with the social system of those interpreted. The study of American society (that is, sociology) precedes and serves as a basis of comparison with other societies (this is cultural or social anthropology). If some U.S. social features emerge in scenarios of the past (for example, individualism, conscience or a sense of guilt), then the scenarios are presumed to be wrong.

In practice social-scientific approaches necessarily emphasize the historical and social distance between first-century Jesus group members and Christians of today. For example, since there were only two important social institutions in antiquity, kinship and politics, the religion of Jesus and Paul, which focused on God's kingdom, is a political religion. The people represented in the New Testament lived in what is to us a strange and irrelevant way, as did our ancestors from even a century ago. However, are ancestors ever really irrelevant?

The two types of history that share explicit social concerns, but without explicit social-scientific interests, can be called social-historical exegesis and social-kerygmatic exegesis. Their theoretical interests are left implicit, and their generalizations are rooted in implicit and unexamined models.

History based on the social-historical interpretation of data is concerned with ordinary people in their ordinary daily lives. The shift is away from the elites and wars of political history, which has often been called simply “history.” Social history presents narrative descriptions of peasants, their families, behaviors, roles and the like. These are invariably drawn according to the historian’s implicit models of how the ancients thought their societies worked. When dealing with the New Testament period, authors interweave social topics with exegesis, leaving theological data in the background. Such history often makes intriguing and interesting reading, but at bottom it has heavy ethnocentric and anachronistic strains. Like social-scientific exegesis, however, social history describes people who would seem strange in today’s world, since they lived at some distance from us and in differing social circumstances.

History based on a social-kerygmatic interpretation of data covers the early and mid-20th-century methods known by the Germanic phrases “form criticism,” “tradition criticism” and “redaction criticism.” The analyses that follow upon a close analytic examination of ancient texts require a social context—a context that often looks very much like the social and churchly setting of the investigators. The results of such study are of immediate relevance to contemporary social and church concerns and are appropriated and recontextualized for ecclesiastical purposes. Theological interests dominate this perspective, and the New Testament appears quite relevant to the contemporary scene. There is little concern about whether the descriptions and ideas this form of interpretation yields are ethnocentric and/or anachronistic, so long as they are relevant to the present.

If Hochschild’s categories are a fair description of the state of New Testament interpretation, one can see that Meeks’s “sociology” is largely of the social-philosophical kind, as opposed to the large majority of New Testament scholars who belong to the social-kerygmatic kind. (A significant minority is devoted to social-scientific exegesis.)

Meeks’s major contribution to New Testament studies is his meticulous command of data amassed for telling the story of Jesus movement groups. As he states, “I began

. . . cautiously, mistrusting generalizations and theoretical constructions, exploring particular situations revealed by close reading of specific texts in the light of all I could learn about social and cultural contexts.”

Yet one wonders if it is possible to learn anything about social and cultural contexts without generalizations and theoretical constructions. As the universality of foundation myths and legends indicates, human beings are impelled by a cognitive imperative to understand things in the largest possible terms. In this regard, the historian William H. McNeill has written, “To move from detail to perception of larger patterns is not achieved by accumulating more and more instances. Appropriate concepts are needed. Each change of scale requires its own vocabulary to direct attention to the critical thresholds and variables. Finding the right things to lump together and the right words to focus attention on critical transitions is the special work of human intelligence—whether applied to history or to everyday encounters with the world.”