Centre for the Social-Scientific Study of the Bible
Cities Of God? - Abstracts

An interdisciplinary and international assessment of early Christian engagement with the ancient urban environment(s)

These abstracts are listed alphabetically by presenters' surnames.

Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, Alexandria ad Aegyptum - The City Which Inspired Polyphony of Early Christian Theologies

Early second-century Alexandria was one of the greatest centers of intellectual and exegetical activity, where Christians from various schools creatively debated the emerging documents of the New Testament. Alexandria, in particular, cherished its pre-Christian intellectual legacy, embodied in academic institutions of its great past: the Royal Library, the Serapeum Library and Mouseion. The paper highlights enormous richness of early Christian debate in this urban milieu; it identifies the most significant Christian voices (Basilides, Carpocrates, Valentinus) and examines the exegetical traditions flourishing in the polis (the Gospel of the Hebrew, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Teaching of Silvanus). The presentation assesses the impact of the Jewish legacy and the Graeco-Roman philosophical diversity of the intellectual life of the city (Stoics, Middle Platonics, Hermetists), but also explores the nature of enigmatic 'Catechetical school' in the light of recent scholarship. It proposes a reconstruction of the intellectual life of the Christian communities in Alexandria. In early second-century Alexandria, in the view of the paper, Christian revelation found one of its most fruitful soils.

Paul Cloke, Spiritual Geographies of the City: Exploring Spiritual Landscapes in Colossae

Contemporary social science research that evaluates the achievements of faith-based organisations in areas of care, welfare, justice and reconciliation (see for example, Beaumont et al., 2012; Cloke et al., 2013) has emphasised how faith in the invisible power of God has been given substance by both faith and event. An emergent faith is connected to a faith in the emergent – a belief in that which is invisible as well as visible - and part of the technology of praxis is the possibility of perceiving, naming and redeeming invisible powers and affects that co-exist amongst more material manifestations. Dewsbury and Cloke (2006) have used the concept of spiritual landscapes as a tool for understanding local places in this light; to recognise the tensions between material presence, apparent spiritual absence, and the ghostly presence of the unseen and invisible spiritual powers and affects the biblical letter to Colossians is used to identify aspects of the spiritual landscapes prevailing in the city of Colossae. It recognises a city marked by the visible and invisible powers of empire, especially the predatory idolatry of control, economism and acquisitive individuation, and the capacity of these powers to shape urban spaces and subjectivities. But it also encourages other dimensions of worship and kingdom power, based on the grace and peace modelled by Jesus, which have the capacity to intervene in the city's spiritual

landscape. Such intervention requires both a discernment of the visible and invisible powers of Roman Empire, and a prophetic witness against the systematic oppression and enculturation of the multitude. In this way, the development of Christian faith can be understood as shaping, and being shaped by the spiritual landscape of the city.

David Gill, Early Christianity in its Colonial Contexts in the Provinces of the Eastern Empire

Early Christian communities emerged in a range of urban communities found across the Roman provinces around the eastern Mediterranean. Some were established in formal Roman colonies such as Pisidian Antioch, Philippi, and Corinth. The urban landscape deliberately evoked Rome, urban officials were known by their Latin terminology, and Latin was the formal language. The colonial contexts provided early Christian communities with a hierarchical structure where Roman citizenship and its related status was highly valued. There was a strong element of personal patronage, such as the likely introduction of Paul to Pisidian Antioch through his encounter with Sergius Paulus the Roman governor of Cyprus. Civic elites from polities such as Sparta are known to have gravitated towards provincial centres such as Corinth during the first century AD. These colonial settings contrast with other poleis such as Athens and Thessalonike that echoed their Hellenistic pasts with their traditional forms of magistracies and cults. It is important to look beyond these colonial settings to the dispersed rural communities within their provinces and their relationship with the urban populations.

David G. Horrell, Placing 1 Peter: Proposed Locations and Constructions of Space

Commentators regularly discuss where 1 Peter was written, with Babylon, Rome and Asia Minor all among the suggested possibilities, based on rather slender evidence in the letter itself. The description of the location of the letter's intended addressees is more extended and explicit, and usually taken at face value. But both aspects of the spatial location of the letter—origin and destination—are presented in the letter in ways that construct particular meaning for these places. Indeed, the proposal of this paper is that the constructions of space in the letter—its symbolic self-locatedness—may be more significant to probe (and more feasible to discern) than the literal place of origin, important though that remains. The paper will explore the symbolic geography of the letter and its socio-political dimensions, considering its origins 'in Babylon', its address 'to the Diaspora', and its depiction of the Christian community as 'living stones', being built into a temple with Christ as cornerstone.

Chris Keith, Urbanization and Literate Status in the New Testament and Early Christian Rome

A maxim in studies of ancient literacy is that literate education was more readily available in urban areas than in rural areas. This notion is correct and helps make sense of several NT texts, such as the assumption of Galilean unlearnedness in John's Gospel or the portrayal of Peter and John's illiteracy in Acts 4:13. Nevertheless, this essay will argue that scholars must apply this generalization to early Christianity with caution. It will do so by appealing to evidence of literate education (or lack thereof) in one particularly urban early Christian environment—Rome. The literate status of various early Christians in late first- and early second-century Rome indicates that social class and wealth, which is strongly related to but separate from the more narrow issue of geography, is the more significant issue in assessing early Christians' literate status.

Anthony Le Donne, Both Jews and Judeans: Claiming Jerusalem as Polysemy in Urban, Rural, and Diaspora Settings

Recent debates concerning the translation of Ἰουδαῖος in the New Testament have taken on ideological and political import. Translators who render Ἰουδαῖος as 'Judean' argue that it better reflects the regional sensibilities of the first century rather than later anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic rhetoric. Those who favor the translation 'Jew' argue that the term denotes a range of regional, ethnic, and ideological senses. Moreover some fear that removing references to 'the Jews' from the New Testament further weakens the historical presence of Jews in antiquity and plays into contemporary anti-Zionist claims. This paper will argue for a both/and solution by placing the regional, ethnic, and ideological affiliations with Jerusalem at center stage. I will suggest that the concept of Jerusalem shared different and overlapping meanings as 'Jews' in various settings adapted it to support their self-identifications as social 'insiders'. I will argue that Jerusalem was a symbol that pointed inward to the sanctuary and outward to limits of Jewishness simultaneously. I will argue that the language of Ἰουδαῖος also reflects this symbolic polysemy.

Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, Diaspora Jewish Attitudes to Metropoleis: Philo and Paul on City Life, Jerusalem and Rome

Philo and Paul both were diaspora Jews with a strong ties to Jerusalem, but embracing life in the big Hellenistic cities and aware of the overall context of the Roman Empire. Paul himself does not speak much about details of life in the cities, but Philo may offer some background in the form of a diaspora Jewish picture of Hellenistic city life.

Philo was a city dweller from birth. In his writings he frequently includes references to aspects of Alexandrian city life. In addition to Alexandria, he visited Rome and Jerusalem. The paper will discuss what it means to him to live as a Jew in a Hellenistic city in general, as well as what he says about these three cities in particular. The special role of Jerusalem will briefly be compared to that of Paul and contrasted to the role of Rome in their respective thoughts.

Helen Morris, The City as Foil (not Friend nor Foe): Conformity and Subversion in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Although the source of Paul's body motif is disputed, resonances between 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and the use of the body metaphor to depict the Greco-Roman city-state imply that this 'political' use was certainly influential. Paul takes the motif in unexpected directions, however, leading scholars to disagree as to the extent to which his use of the metaphor reinforces or subverts the status quo. This paper re-examines this issue, and thus Paul's view of the city, in light of Paul's presentation of the consummation of God's kingdom in 15:20-28. It argues that the theme of union with Christ links 12:12-31 and 15:20-28, indicating that Paul sees the church as an anticipation of the consummated kingdom; in other words, through its union with Christ now, the church is to anticipate the reality that is to come when all things are under Christ's lordship.

Re-reading 12:12-31 in this light explains some ambivalence on Paul's part in relation to the city's societal structures. On the one hand, Paul assumes variations in status (12:1) and even gives divine endorsement to the allotment of different positions and roles (12:18, 28). On the other hand, his aim is not the political expediency of undisrupted harmony as promoted by this metaphor elsewhere. On the contrary, where differences, even inequalities, exist, they are for Paul an opportunity for the church to demonstrate its citizenship of a radically distinct kingdom. In other words, for Paul, the unity and solidarity of the church is all the more distinctive for being a unity that relativises, and thus subverts, real differences. The city's societal structures, in all their disparity, are therefore neither a foe to be revolted against nor a friend to be unthinkingly embraced. Rather, they are a foil, against which the believers' unity, solidarity and mutual

edification is meant to shine all the more brightly as an anticipation of that future unity of all things under Christ.

Ian Paul, A Tale of Two (or Seven) Cities

The book of Revelation is written with the consistent assumption of an urban context. Those being addressed inhabit cities, some of them of considerable importance in the first century. And much of the polemic in Revelation centres around two other cities—Jerusalem and Rome—and their interpretations. The challenge of John's vision to his readers is how they will live out their citizenship in their own cities as citizens of either earthly Rome or heavenly Jerusalem.

This paper will explore this issue in two parts. The first will consist of a review of what we know about the social realities of the seven cities, and how this knowledge affects our reading both of Rev 2 and 3 and the letter as a whole. What does the first century 'theatre of reception' look like? And how is life depicted for early urban Christians within the seven messages?

The second part will explore the depictions of Jerusalem and Rome within the text, and how their metaphorical configuration relates to the social realities of the two cities. Which features are foregrounded and focussed on, and which are stripped away and ignored? Understanding the move from social reality to theological depiction will then clarify the rhetorical strategy of the text, and how it invites readers to re-evaluate their loyalties to one or the other. Revelation's agenda is that the theological identity of the city shapes its readers' social response to urban reality.

Volker Rabens, Paul's Mission Strategy in the Urban Landscape of the First-Century Roman Empire

No other figure of the Bible has visited more cites than the Apostle Paul in the context of his missionary journeys. This paper investigates Paul's missionary practice among and in the cities of the Roman Empire. Did Paul have a cleverly devised strategy to help him visit as many cities as possible on the one hand, and on the other hand to effectively reach as many people as possible in those cities? I will argue that Paul's mission was mainly driven by basic principles rather than by a temporal or geographical master plan. In the first part of the paper I will look at how Paul's aim to preach where the gospel had not yet been heard provoked geographical movement. I will discuss whether the route and the cities that Paul chose in this context was guided by a Jewish (R. Riesner etc.) or Roman (K. Magda) territoriality paradigm (R. Sack) or by both. The second part of the paper will then explore the apostle's concrete behavior upon his arrival in a city and his reflections on founding churches in the context of the social realities of urban life in the Roman Empire.

Anders Runesson, Jerusalem according to Matthew: The Sacred City of God

Since the publication of Wayne Meeks' The First Urban Christians in 1983 it has become commonplace to locate the earliest developments of the movement that would become identified as Christianity in urban Mediterranean settings, with a special focus on Paul (cf. T. Still and D. Horrell, After the First Urban Christians, 2009). But how did Christ-groups relate to the urban centre par excellence in Judaism, Jerusalem—the navel of the world in Jewish thought and praxis, but for Romans a marginal and rebellious eastern city? In this paper, I will focus on how Jerusalem is construed in the narrative world of one text, the Gospel of Matthew. While some scholars have concluded that Matthew rejects Jerusalem (and Judaea as a whole; France 2007), others have claimed that Matthew understands the temple as a legitimate institution, implying a continued focus on Jerusalem as God's city (Gurtner 2008). These two interpretive trajectories are not, however, as mutually exclusive as they might seem at first. Building on Jewish notions of holiness and purity—fundamental ideas that construe reality in Matthew's text—this paper will argue that

Jerusalem maintains its status as the city of God throughout the narrative (and beyond), despite the fact that, as the progression of the story reveals, the temple will become defiled and the city, as a consequence, will face destruction. Indeed, the fall of Jerusalem is not seen as divine punishment for Jesus' death. It is the other way around: Jerusalem's inevitable destruction, caused by the shedding of innocent blood in Israel's history and present (23:34-24:2), necessitates Jesus' sacrificial death, which will restore the covenant and save the people (26:28; cf. 1:21). The capital of the Empire, Rome, is thus decentred in this narrative, and Jerusalem, defeated by Rome at the time when Matthew writes, is retained as God's chosen and sacred city, the centre of a coming kingdom about to conquer the world.

Matthew Sleeman, Paul, Pentecost and the Nomosphere: The Final Return to Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles

Acts engages with many cities, but none as much as Jerusalem. After dominating the narrative's opening chapters, and having been an occasional setting up until the Acts 15 council, Jerusalem hosts one final visit by Paul, during the second Pentecost festival recounted in Acts. Using the notion of the nomosphere, drawn from critical legal geography, (David Delaney, The Spatial, the Legal and the Pragmatics of World-Making: Nomospheric Investigations (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), this paper engages in a close reading of how Jerusalem contributes to, and is exegeted and constructed by, this final encounter.

Acts 21 presents Paul and James as working together, but it is Paul who has to re-enter the city's public space to perform his normative and embodied lived experience of the life in Jesus he is called to live. This calls for the boldness in place-making which is evident elsewhere in Acts but which, on this occasion, seemingly meets with frustration and disaster. Various normative visions for the city clash and, in multiple ways, interact to forge the ongoing movement of the narrative and its vision. These conflicting visions, intimated and evident earlier in Acts, here come to a head. Paul, together with the 'we' group, makes a resourceful play for a 'right to the city': even when frustrated, this strategy contributes to the 'certainty' communicated to Theophilus and other ancient audiences.

A nomospheric reading highlights the contested nature of the city, and also how it is both needed and needled by Paul's mission to both Jews and Gentiles. Jerusalem illuminates the tensions within this mission, and shows that, not only does the mission have to be embodied in lived experience somewhere, it has to be embodied here, in the city where Luke's narrative began and from where the mission sprang.

Joan Taylor, Paul's Caesarea

Caesarea Maritima was the seat of Roman governance in Judaea at the time of Paul, and in Acts (23:23–26:32) it is to Caesarea that Paul is taken, imprisoned and put on trial. In Caesarea Paul declares he is a Roman citizen. Excavations in Caesarea have revealed much of Paul's city, especially the Praetorium, where Paul's interactions with the procurators Felix and Festus took place, and also the harbor, from which Paul set sail with his companions (Acts 27:1-2). Data from these excavations can be combined with the literature of Josephus to illuminate the urban environment of Paul's incarceration.

In Acts, the city of Caesarea, which boasted a magnificent imperial cult temple built by Herod the Great, functions as a cipher for imperial power, and thus the treatment and judgements concerning Paul may be read as a case for a fair treatment of Christians in the empire. Additionally, in due course Caesarea would become one of the Mediterranean's most important Christian cities,

and Paul's significant period of internment here as described in Acts was important when pilgrims looked to places as sites of remembrance.

Paul Trebilco, Engaging—or Not Engaging—the City: Reading 1–2 Timothy and the Johannine Letters in the City of Ephesus

In 104 CE, C. Vibius Salutaris made a bequest to the city of Ephesus. From then on, a procession of 31 statues and images that involved around 260 people, wound its way through the city of Ephesus roughly every two weeks. This provides a vivid context in which to consider how the readers of 1 and 2 Timothy and 1-3 John, documents which can be connected to Ephesus, would have thought about and responded to the city in which they lived.

It will be argued that the readers of 1 and 2 Timothy would generally have portrayed their city in a positive light. Although they would have regarded Greco-Roman worship negatively, they viewed the wider city culture more positively and sought to engage outsiders in the way they lived. One dimension of their positive attitude to the city was to use modes of thought and language that were at home in the city of Ephesus to express their theology.

It will then be shown that a very different attitude was probably demonstrated by the readers of 1-3 John. While they were influenced to some extent by their city context, it will be shown that they generally isolated themselves from city life, which they regarded as dangerous.

Conclusions will then be drawn about how early Christians thought about and responded to their surroundings in the city.

Steve Walton, Heavenly Citizenship and Earthly Authorities: Philippians 1:27; 3:20 in Dialogue with Acts 16:11-40

In Acts 16, Paul engages with the civic authorities in Philippi and (after being jailed and beaten) plays the card of his Roman citizenship to force an apology from them. In Philippians, Paul uses the language of citizenship twice (1:27; 3:20), appearing in one case to speak of earthly lifestyle as a citizen of Philippi (1:27) and in the other to use the image of citizenship in relation to Christians' standing with God (3:20). How far do the attitudes to heavenly and earthly citizenship in these two sources (Philippians and Acts) interlock? Bruce Winter has explored Phil 1:27 in dialogue with Graeco-Roman sources about πολιτεία, and argues that Paul's thrust is that the believers should 'live worthily of the gospel as citizens', seen particularly in the unity of the believing community within the Roman colonia of Philippi, rather than allowing private disputes to emerge into the public arena. This paper will focus on Philippians 3:20 in the context of Philippi as a colonia, elucidate its meaning, and ask how far and in what way(s) Luke's portrait of Paul's interaction with the city authorites models the stance which Paul urges on the Philippian believers (surprisingly, an issue hardly discussed in the commentaries on Philippians and Acts).

Wei-Hsien Wan, The Making of Social Vertigo: Spatial Production and Non-belonging in 1 Peter

In 1 Peter, the author's reference to his recipients as 'strangers of the Diaspora' (1:1) has generated debates as to whether this designation is to be taken literally or figuratively, leading to divergent conclusions regarding the ethno-religious composition of the letter's first readers. Similarly, interpretive options for the reference to 'Babylon' (5:13) have spawned various hypotheses about the provenance and date of the epistle itself. Discussions on both fronts, however, have tended to underestimate the manner in which these terms work synergistically to generate a trope of displacement in the letter, engendered also in the author's well-known

characterization of his readers as 'resident aliens and strangers' (2:11). This trope acquires sociopolitical force when considered as an act of spatial production: it contests Rome's geography of power as evidenced in the Anatolian imperial cults—a remapping of the world that sought to centre it on the imperial city and its rulers. By means of an alternative spatial imagination, 1 Peter legitimized its readers' experience of non-belonging in Roman Asia Minor and valorized it as a badge of authentic Christian discipleship.