

BOOK REVIEW

Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (Routledge Early Church Monographs Series; Abingdon: Routledge, 2003; repr. New York: Routledge, 2005). xiv + 272 pp. Pbk. US\$34.95.

This journal's book review forum has quite naturally become a locus for the thriving discussion of the social setting and function of early Christian texts. Magnus Zetterholm's project is one of the more ambitious contributions to this field, as the author attempts to trace the development of Christianity itself as a social movement. *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch* posits Christianity's development as an increasingly Gentile religion, separate from and even critical of its initially Jewish origins. It is a reconstructive enterprise, a search for the mechanisms of change in an urban environment of religious pluralism, frequent social turmoil and Roman rule.

Zetterholm begins by outlining the goals and processes behind his research, using Dunn's *The Parting of the Ways* as a point of departure and criticism. The author's methods of interpretation are especially important, for he analyzes ancient literary sources in light of modern social-scientific theories. His theoretical assumptions, while well-grounded in the work of P. Berger, T. Luckmann and others, presuppose a phenomenological approach to the construction of reality and religious worldviews. Theological shifts are thus perceived socially: conversion is significantly defined as 'leaving one religion for another' (p. 6), a transition entailing a process of resocialization and the reconstruction of one's symbolic universe. It follows that such changes are often reflected in contemporary literary works.

In order to make sense of his ancient sources, Zetterholm turns in Chapter 2 to his selected historical setting, Antioch-on-the-Orontes. Here he impresses upon his reader the image of Antioch as a pluralistic and turbulent Greco-Roman *polis*, plagued by poor sanitation and

resulting epidemic diseases, and dependent upon both a steady influx of immigrants to repopulate the workforce and a network of collegial organizations to maintain a fragile peace. The city was a setting of economic and social disparities, though Zetterholm's work reflects these inequities only occasionally, as when he comments that 'the golden age that resulted from the *Pax Augusta* allowed a long period of material prosperity for Antioch' (p. 23), but later notes in detail the miserable living conditions of the city's lower classes. He focuses in particular on the social and legal status of Jews (especially immigrants and Diaspora refugees) and their synagogues within the ranks of Antiochean society. This historical reconstruction is an enterprise composed of what Zetterholm calls 'well-founded conjectures' (p. 38), culminating in a proposed social function of the synagogues themselves. The synagogues were not merely religious centres but *community* centres 'with both the ideology to provide for the less fortunate and the means to realize such an ideology', even within a chaotic city environment and an 'ideologically stratified' Jewish community (p. 42).

While ideology is not the author's primary concern, he insists that ideology 'expressed in literary texts reflects mainly the view of the cultural elite and not that of ordinary people' (p. 53), a claim that threatens to undermine his use of Josephus, Philo, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Jewish and Christian canonical texts in his third chapter, 'Cultural and Religious Differentiation'. Zetterholm admits in his introduction that this section is highly theoretical, as he seeks to apply modern observations on international migration and cultural assimilation to Antioch. Noting again the constant flow of immigration and the 'high degree of general mobility' on the roads of the Roman Empire, he speaks of the immigrant's shift from majority to minority status and the resulting changes in individual and communal value systems, effects which 'would most probably have been operative in ancient Antioch' (pp. 57-58). Zetterholm modifies a set of 'assimilation variables' first suggested by M. Gordon into a series of sub-processes that illustrate cultural integration by degrees: initial acculturation is followed by five levels of assimilation (*structural, marital, identificational, attitude-receptional*, and finally *civic* assimilation).

Using these categories, the author profiles four distinct groups within Antiochean Judaism. He moves from the completely assimilated group represented by Antiochus in Josephus' accounts (*War* 7), where attitudinal and civic assimilation is measured by the willingness of

circumcised men to undergo epispasm, to religious traditionalists, who were certainly acculturated but employed their knowledge of Hellenistic society to avoid assimilation. At least for this group, resistance was not necessarily futile. Zetterholm next charts two groups between these extremes: messianic (Jesus-believing) Jews and Hellenistic (somewhat syncretistic) Jews. These groups shared a common assimilation profile, in that their members participated in Greco-Roman social organizations and may even have intermarried, yet for the most part remained unassimilated. Zetterholm concludes by connecting these degrees of religious differentiation to synagogal affiliation, making a convincing argument that the descriptions of separate synagogues (or *ekklēsia*) in Acts 6.8-9 and Judith 6.16-19 correspond to the various groups within the proposed spectrum of cultural and religious assimilation. Synagogal labels would thus seem to characterize denominations in miniature. It is in this diverse setting that the disciples were first called 'Christians' in Antioch—a designation Zetterholm takes to be intra-Jewish, not a distinction between one religion and another.

Chapter 4, 'Evidence of Interaction', builds upon this model of differentiation by exploring the inferred reactions, both positive and negative, to Antiochean Jews. Zetterholm returns to the case of Antiochus, recorded instances of rioting, and other incidents to show that there were intense rivalries in Antioch, and even aggressive anti-Jewish pogroms reminiscent of Kristallnacht; yet he also details the attraction to Judaism evident among the ranks of god-fearers and other Gentile admirers. The author offers insightful comments on the god-fearing worldview as a *via media* between Gentile social/religious identity and the Jewish promise of salvation, though for the majority of Gentiles 'the idea of abandoning all other deities for the god of Israel seemed preposterous and unnecessary' (p. 127). This unstable situation forms the backdrop for 'the incident at Antioch' from Galatians 2, a dispute Zetterholm interprets as a problem of the eschatological and covenantal status of Gentiles: Paul attempted to expand the theology of Israel's covenant to include the diversity of Gentile participation, but suffered an 'ideological defeat' before the more traditional views on Jewish identity markers espoused by James and other apostles. Interaction between Jews and Gentiles within the Jesus-believing community was problematic at best, and in the Galatians incident Zetterholm locates the 'embryo' (p. 166) of later and more permanent divisions.

‘Politics and Persecution’ is Zetterholm’s final full chapter; here he draws together his earlier arguments to portray Christianity’s emergence as a social movement, twice describing the process of innovative religious formulation as a ‘theologically motivated social division’ (pp. 178, 195). This is an apt depiction, but one that reveals Zetterholm’s basic agenda: ideological and theological concepts are resources to be marshalled in effecting desirable changes in social polity. Sources of conflict, from active efforts at persecution to the enforcement of the *fiscus Judaicus* tax, sharpened the boundaries between Jew and Gentile, especially in the late-first-century church. For Zetterholm, Christianity was formed essentially through a series of communal identity crises, coming to a peak in the writings of Ignatius, who used the themes of solidarity and discipleship in Matthew to legitimate the interpretative authority of his group of Gentile Christians. Though the author has for the most part avoided ideological arguments in favour of societal ones, here the former are crucial to his case: Gentile Christianity legitimizes itself over against Jewish Christianity through a sequence of ideological appropriations, moves that support the Gentile church’s efforts to reposition itself within Antioch’s power structure. Zetterholm’s argument is marred slightly by an apparent misprint, when he says that ‘for some Jews [should it not read *for some Gentiles?*], the combination of a repudiation of Jews but assent to their religious tradition may have appeared as an attractive alternative’ to the increasing divisions within Christianity (p. 216).

Fortunately, this does not subtract much from the effectiveness of Zetterholm’s proposal, which he reviews in his epilogue. The author is able to summarize his entire argument in two short pages, as though writing the concluding comments to a sociological experiment. The reader can freely dispute smaller components of this summary, as when Zetterholm describes Paul’s covenantal-theological solution to intra-church division as ‘the utopian Pauline vision of the eschatological community’ (p. 232); was Paul really so naïve with regard to Jewish theology and tradition? But the author has certainly done what he set out to do, showing that the divisions in the Antiochean church were formed between Jesus-believing Jews and Jesus-believing Gentiles, with legal and religious recognition in city polity at stake. It is even possible, as Zetterholm speculates, that the process of separation and ideological adaptation hypothesized in Antioch might have been present elsewhere in the Empire. He does well to remember this imperial

setting, even in the context of first-century Judaism. Antioch was a Greek city under Roman rule, and such imperialistic force carries with it an undeniable ideological weight, what Zetterholm refers to as the exercise of 'cultural power' over a conquered society (p. 71). The Empire and the obligations of the imperial cult were driving forces behind the process of assimilation, and exemptions did not come without cost: 'torah-obedient Jews had to cope with the fact that the price they had to pay in order to continue worshipping the god of Israel was a subscription to Jupiter' (p. 186). Jewish identity was defined not just by self-imposed marks of covenant, but also by external forces such as Roman taxation. Little wonder, then, that Gentile Christians experienced such difficulty defining their own role in the Jewish and Roman societies, and that this definition came at the cost of church unity.

Zetterholm makes a convincing case, and wisely imposes limits on his own research and its implications. He repeatedly insists that he argues not for indisputable historicity but for plausibility and coherence, especially in the absence of more concrete documentation. He makes skilful use of the literary sources at his disposal, and if the resulting work remains theoretical, it does provide valuable frameworks for future discussion and discoveries regarding the development of the early Gentile church.

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