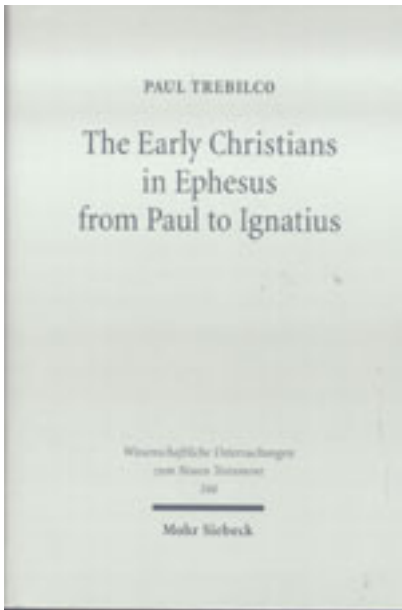


RBL 02/2005



Trebilco, Paul

The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 166

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004. Pp. xxi + 826.
Hardcover. EUR 149.00. ISBN 3161482719.

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In this impressively hefty tome, Trebilco examines the first sixty-odd years of Christianity in Ephesus, one of the largest and most important cities in the Roman Empire. He tracks the Christian legacy from shadowy pre-Pauline Jewish-Christians to the situation to which Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians responded, working almost exclusively with the literary documents produced by, or related to, the Christians of that city, namely the Pastorals, the Johannine letters, Revelation, and the Ignatian correspondence.¹

He argues that there are two main groups that make up the Christian "scene" in Ephesus, namely, a Johannine community, responsible for 1–3 John, and a Pauline community, responsible for the Pastorals. The two groups would have known about each other, but in the era of house churches it would have been easy for them to maintain a great deal of separation, although nothing suggests that they would actually have opposed one

1. Although Trebilco views it as likely that the Gospel of John was produced in Ephesus, he does not view it as having a bearing on the specifically Ephesian Christian community. Following Bauckham (*The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]), he argues that the Gospels are not simply the expressions of and for specific small communities but rather are deliberately universal writings, meant for Christians everywhere.

another.² Trebilco notes that the necessarily small size of house churches “fostered the maintenance of difference, and the practicalities of house churches had an impact on the emergence and maintenance of diversity within the Christian communities of a large city” (99).

To judge by its literature (and this is a very important caveat), the Johannine group would have been more exclusivist and community-oriented, diligent in establishing boundaries between itself and the outside world. The Pauline group (again, judging by its literature), while of course maintaining a fair degree of separation between itself and its pagan neighbors, would nonetheless have been somewhat more accommodationist, more open to the outside world, as is shown by the tendency in the Pastorals to translate “significant theological ideas into more acculturated forms” (382), forms that would have been more comprehensible to their pagan neighbors. Both groups had problems with some of their members and separated from them, these problems in fact being the spur for the production of the literature that is all that remains to us of these groups. And both groups would have been targeted as possible supporters by the author of Revelation, who can be seen perhaps as an apocalyptic Johannine, fiercely opposed to any interaction between Christians and the Roman state, and later by Ignatius and his monarchical dreams.

It is always risky to move from literature to sociological entities such as communities, and perhaps some will be unwilling to take this step with Trebilco, particularly given the paucity of the literature and the consideration that each “community” is reconstructed solely on the basis of one author, if, as seems likely, we ascribe the Pastorals to one author, and 1–3 John to another. However, if the basic idea that various sorts of literature spring from various sorts of distinguishable groups is granted, then one cannot fail to be struck by the finesse of Trebilco’s analysis. Particularly striking is his presentation of the titles given as self-designations in the relevant literature. The term ἀδελφός is, of course, common to both groups and represents what Trebilco calls “horizontal” self-designation, that is, the way that members of the group refer to themselves in relation to each other. But differences emerge with regard to their vertical self-designation, their self-reference

2. Trebilco notes that “both the Pastorals and the Johannine letters were written with ‘opponents’ in view. . . . We thus see lines of exclusion emerging in both cases. For the Pastor, the crucial matters concerned eschatology, asceticism, the Law and behaviour. . . . For 1 John, the crucial matter was the Christology of the secessionists. . . . It is noteworthy that neither group would have regarded the other in the same way as they saw their ‘opponents.’ Neither group would have failed the particular ‘litmus tests’ that the other group had used with regard to their ‘opponents’ and which their respective opponents had failed” (593). Trebilco’s vision of the relations between the groups has more to do with peaceful coexistence than with “the ‘merger’ or ‘takeover’ theory which has been advocated by some scholars, which would suggest that the Pauline and Johannine communities merged, or that the Pauline group was taken over by Johannine influence and that there was only one Christian community in Ephesus at any one time” (713).

in relation to God. The Pauline community (or the author of the Pastorals) use οἱ πιστοί; the Johannine (community or author), τέκνα θεοῦ, an evocative difference that speaks volumes.

An underlying theme of Trebilco's work is the interaction of different forms of authority, from that of the Johannine community, which is extremely personal, with individual leaders arising from a generally empowered community, to that of the Pastoral community, which is more organized and formally structured but which lacks the distinct and specific leadership role of a respected elder in the Johannine community. But by the time that Ignatius comes along, this lack is filled in, albeit not (as before) by someone whose authority comes from peculiarly personal traits. Rather, the formalization of the Christian leadership procedure has progressed to the point that we now find a bishop, preferably well-nigh omnipotent, whose position results from and guarantees the hierarchy stretching off down below him.³ The model of prophetic authority promulgated by Revelation, with its assurance of direct spiritual sanction of its leaders, attempts to cut across the community or hierarchy-based models of the other groups, ironically hearkening back to Paul's own attempts to ground his authority in the prophetic lineage (cf. Gal 1:13–17).

Trebilco's points are well and clearly argued, and his willingness to leave irresolvable or uncertain issues unresolved, even in cases where he quite clearly has strong opinions on the matter, is a credit to him. I have no argument with his conclusions, and many of his hunches seem quite possible: there are only two things that prevent me from leaping enthusiastically into his camp. The first of my hesitations is that, in my opinion, he overestimates the amount of reliable information about sociological conditions that one can gain from analyses of vocabulary and syntax, especially with sample groups of such miniscule size as the Pastorals or 1–3 John (the latter group's tendency to repeat itself further diminishes the sample size).

Why then, we might ask, is so much weight put on analyses of vocabulary and syntax? The answer to this question leads into my second hesitation. We overuse the material we have because we have so little material.⁴ In fact, we have too little material to prove

3. Trebilco understands Ignatius's aims as having more to do with the institution of a new concept of authority than with dogma per se and thus critiques Bauer's earlier thesis that those who "resist the bishop" must be seen as "heretics" (whatever that term might mean at the start of the second century). "In Ephesus, it is more likely that they are other Christians who are resisting a change in church order, and so . . . we need not see the differences between those who are 'with the bishop' and those who resist him as reflecting theological matters" (715).

4. Although one does wonder if more use could have been made of inscriptions and such sources. Trebilco does use them in his general introduction to Ephesus, but once he focuses on the Christian community, he works almost exclusively with the literary sources.

conclusively any hypothesis as detailed as that of Trebilco. He may be right; indeed, he argues his case extremely well; yet, despite this, said case is not *proved* and probably never will be. We must take these reconstructions with a large grain of salt.

I do have one small criticism to make, and that is that the work could have benefited from more attentive proofreading from a stylistic point of view, especially—for whatever reason—the first third of the book. One's pleasure in reading and in following Trebilco's logic is unfortunately diminished by a number of awkward or downright incorrect turns of phrase, and (to choose just one example) Trebilco's tendency to use "whilst" when he means "while" definitely begins to wear on one after seven hundred pages. This is not a major issue, obviously, but it is noteworthy.

Overall, this book is to be recommended. It presents, clearly and powerfully, a strong and coherent hypothesis that attempts to make sense of the development of Christianity and the interaction of the many small groups within it, groups that came into being and flourished in the first and early second century but that gradually gave way to the larger, more hierarchical structures championed by such men as Ignatius, as his letter to the Ephesians attests. Those interested in early Christianity, the Pauline or Johannine communities, or the writings that Trebilco discusses are sure to find this volume a fascinating read.