This monumental volume was widely read and discussed shortly after it appeared in 1983 (see, e.g., Bruce J. Malina’s review in JBL 104 [1985]: 346–49). However, because it provides an excellent theoretical foundation for the discussion of the environment of the Pauline churches, mainly the community of Corinth, the book has been translated into many languages. Meeks’s major contribution to the study of Paul was the accumulation of data derived from social description. Thus, there is now no scholar in the field of New Testament studies who does not know Meeks’s The First Urban Christians. In the past two decades the world of New Testament scholarship has seen a number of important publications applying the social-science models of interpretation that have fundamentally transformed the way New Testament scholars view the early Christians. Meeks is certainly one of the first who started this way of reading the texts. Thus, the second edition of this classic work is quite welcome.

For those already familiar with the various sociological methods of New Testament interpretation, this volume provides one of the first attempts to describe the life of the early Christians through social history. After the first publication of this book, scholarly research widely adopted Meeks’s understanding of the socioeconomic status of the first urban Christians. As regards social-science methodology, Meeks preferred the position of
a moderate functionalist. He was right that this kind of social description proved to be very helpful to New Testament scholars who explore Christian origins.

Regarding the general contents of the book, there are no significant changes. In the introduction is a discussion about the approach through social description. The work is then divided into six chapters. The first chapter deals with the urban environment of Pauline Christianity. Meeks analyzes the letters of Paul to describe the life of the first urban Christians. His work relies also heavily on the portrait of such Christians painted in the book of Acts. He often quotes first-century Greek and Latin sources to portray the daily life of first-century Mediterranean people.

The second chapter is an attempt to describe the social levels of Pauline Christians. After the first publication, scholars working with social-scientific approaches criticized this chapter in terms of its methodological problems. Such problems include ethnocentrism, anachronistic assumptions about the ancient city, classification, the presupposition that the Pauline communities exhibited the same basic social level, and so forth. Here Meeks concludes that there was a mixture of social levels in each congregation.

The third chapter surveys the formation of the ekklesia. This is the best chapter in the book, providing many insights. Meeks states that the environment offers four models that are helpful to understand the formation of the local church: household, voluntary association, synagogue, and philosophic or rhetorical school. Here similarities and differences between the ekklesia and the four models are underlined.

The fourth chapter explores the governance of the church. Here the focus of interest relies upon the organizational dimension of the local church. Conflicts reflected in the letters are the basic point of research.

The fifth chapter deals with Christian rituals. Meeks prefers to classify them into minor and major (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) rituals. Baptism is characterized as a ritual of initiation, while the Lord’s Supper is a ritual of solidarity. This is the way in which the two major Christian rites functioned within the worship community. In the last two pages of the chapter there is a brief reference to unknown and controverted rituals.

The last chapter, on patterns of belief and patterns of life, discusses the social force of what one typical member of the Pauline churches believed in the first century. The author highlights a data collected not only from the undisputed Pauline letters but also from the deutero-Pauline ones. Pauline churches are considered as millenarian movements, which is explained using models from anthropology.
The additions in the previous edition are the preface to the new edition and a supplementary bibliography (279–82). These pages are supplemented with a number of works from 1983 since 2001. It is of interest to note that the format of the endnotes is the same. The main body of the text remains also the same, even down to the page numbers. Meeks’s style is very readable. Ideas such as the interaction between separation from and openness to the world that Meeks underlined for the Pauline communities affected scholars during the past years to apply them in their works on other Christian communities.

This major work deserves a careful reading by all scholars in New Testament studies and related fields. Meeks has succeeded in producing a work that distills much from the world of academics and presents it in an accessible format that will both engage and assist the nonspecialist reader. The book is well produced and indexed. The second edition of this important work will ensure that it retains its well-deserved place in the libraries of scholars of the New Testament for years to come.