Spring Meeting 2011

Report of the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins

Stephen J. Patterson, Chair

When the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins gathered in Salem, Oregon on April 1–2, there were two things on the agenda. The first was to get a bearing on the next location for our continuing exploration of Christian origins, Roman Corinth, the site of a major Pauline community and the recipient of several extant letters from the Apostle Paul. The second was to sit down for an extended conversation with Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, whose work on Christian origins has transformed the way we think about this same Apostle Paul, as well as many other facets of the long story of how Christianity began.

Archaeology and Roman Corinth

Friday was devoted to Roman Corinth. We began with an illustrated lecture from Betsey Robinson of the Department of Classics at Vanderbilt University, an expert on Corinth in the period of Christian origins. Robinson’s finely tuned architectural eye helped us to understand the extent to which Corinth in Paul’s day was a veritable display of Roman imperial presence and power. Corinth was of enormous strategic importance to anyone who wanted to control trade and transportation along the northern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Located on the narrow isthmus connecting the Greek mainland to the Peloponnesus, it was a point of transfer for east-west sea trade as well as north-south land routes. The Acrocorinth, a towering peak rising up several hundred feet behind the ancient city, offered a defensive position from which one could survey both land and sea for miles around. And in Corinth itself, springs gushed forth the most important commodity of all in that relatively arid landscape: water. These may not have been the reasons Paul came to Corinth, but they were the reasons Rome made Corinth its provincial capital. When Paul arrived there in the 40s of the Common Era, it was already one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire.

Roman Corinth has been excavated since the nineteenth century, but how much have we learned that will guide us in our understanding of the nascent Christian groups that took root there? Not as much as we think, it turns out. One of the most famous discoveries at Corinth is a paving stone into which is carved the name “Erastus,” who, so it indicates, paid for that ancient paving project in return for having been chosen “aedile,” a high office open only to the wealthiest first citizens of the city. It just so happens that Paul, in his letter to the Romans (16:23), mentions a certain Erastus from his own circle, who was the city oikonomos (often translated “city treasurer”). Could this be the same person? Steve Friesen (“The Wrong Erastus: Ideology, Archaeology, and Exegesis”) warned us not to assume so. In fact, the story of the Erastus inscription turns out to be something of a cautionary tale. Careful archaeological analysis shows that the paving stone into which the inscription was carved was quarried no earlier than the second century; therefore, its inscription could not refer to our New Testament Erastus, who would have lived a century earlier. But scholars eager to find New Testament references cast in stone, and archaeologists equally eager for pilgrims (and the tourist dollars they bring with them), have been less than discerning with this evidence. And so, virtually every commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans mentions this inscription and its famous aedile.

The results of this mistaken identity have not been minor. For example, scholars wishing to show that Paul’s missionary efforts were not aimed primarily at the poor (or “nothings” of this world, as Paul himself calls them in 1 Corinthians 1:28), but also at the very wealthy, routinely

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**Explanation of voting**

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<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>not true (0–.25*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>probably not true (.2501–.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>probably true (0.5001–.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>true (.7501–1) *Weighted average</td>
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</tbody>
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**Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins**

Q1 The Erastus inscription from Corinth refers to the figure mentioned by Paul.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fellows</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>Black 0.09% R 0.07% P 0.04% G 0.80% B</td>
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point to the figure of Erastus as a case in point. He is actually the only clear case in point, that is, if he really was an aedile. But he wasn’t. The Erastus Paul mentions in Romans 16:23 was a city oikonomos, a low-level function often assigned to slaves, not a wealthy aedile. For Friesen, this is just the kind of gaffe that can result when exegetes and archaeologists reinforce one another’s bad habits.

Dan Schowalter (“Seeking Shelter in Roman Corinth: Archaeology and the Placement of Paul’s Communities”) had a similar message of caution. His contribution had to do with the question of where, or in what kind of space, we might imagine nascent Christians to have gathered in Corinth. In the 1960s the once magnificent Anaploga Villa had just been excavated, so all attention was focused there as a representative example of typical domestic space in Corinth. This would have been the setting for early Christian gatherings. In the 1980s another kind of domestic space was imagined in the area east of the ancient theatre in Corinth. There one finds a series of small shops that scholars once thought would have constituted the first floor of small multi-storied structures with cramped apartments rising above the shops below. This, argued others, would have been a more likely domestic space within which to imagine the gatherings of nascent Christian groups. The problem with both suggestions, however, is that neither rests on a complete archaeological record. It turns out that the theater district shops had no upper floors after all. As for the Anaploga Villa, the results of its excavation were never fully published and the remains of the villa now reside a few feet below a modern olive grove. We don’t know how typical it was, or even how its rooms might have been used.

Material culture, it turns out, is a powerful lure for those of us who deal primarily in texts. Texts require interpretation. Material culture seems to hold out the possibility of concrete, hard data. But this is an illusion. Material remains are also a subject matter requiring much interpretation. They make our work more complete and interesting, but they do not solve all our problems.

One of the ways archaeology makes our work more complete is by the addition of non-literary evidence. The ancient world was largely an illiterate world. Texts, therefore, offer a fairly narrow slice of the culture by which to study the ancient world, and a very elite one at that. Material culture can broaden that narrow vision by adding to it things that virtually everyone could see, think about, use, etc. Sometimes when material remains are brought into the picture we see just how distorted the textual view can be. Christine Thomas’ paper (“Greek Heritage in Roman Corinth and Ephesos: Hybrid Identities and the Strategies of Display in the Material Record of Traditional Mediterranean Religions”) offered an illustration of great importance to a deeper understanding of Corinth. From the extant literature from this period, one might easily conclude that the identity of Roman Corinth was distinctly Greek. But analysis of the architectural history of civic and religious buildings shows something quite different: a hybrid identity blending traditional Greek institutions and values with Roman imperial values and priorities. When Corinth was re-founded in the early Augustan period, all of its old temples were rebuilt in more or less the same sacred locations on which they had stood a century before. But architecturally, the new structures were all Roman in both style and function. When Paul came to Corinth, it was no longer the ancient Greek city renowned for its prostitutes and wild living, but a thoroughly Romanized provincial capital whose physical aspect embodied power, order, and control.

James Walters’ paper (“Paul and the Politics of Meals in Roman Corinth”) also offers an excellent example of how material culture can make our discussion of texts more interesting and complete. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul takes issue with the Corinthian leaders for the way in which they are conducting the common meals that these nascent Christian groups were accustomed to holding. From the text of Paul’s letter, we gain access to some important aspects of the problem, especially that their practices had begun to create distinctions between the haves and the have-nots, so that those who have nothing come to the meal and are once again humiliated. Walters, however, shows that there is more. The focus of his paper was the Roman law that governed newly established colonies like Corinth, as revealed by a set of surviving bronze tablets from a similar and contemporary colony in Spain. Part of the law governs the staging of banquets: in a year in which one is to stand for election to high office, one is prohibited from throwing large banquets, as this would be considered a form of bribery. This may at first appear absurd. But the simple facts of ancient life—as pertains to food—make this far from the case. The vast majority of ancient folk lived at subsistence level, earning just enough to feed themselves and perhaps a small family on rations of
meal and water laced with wine. With simple fare, and in spare quantities, one may easily imagine the effect a well-provisioned banquet might have. Walters argues, therefore, that part of Paul’s problem in Corinth was that the banquets themselves were a sign that local leaders were about the business of building up a following, and perhaps challenging Paul as the original patron of the group. If “money talks” today, in Antiquity food did most of the talking.

As we move forward in our study of nascent Christianity in Corinth, studies like these will help us mark the way. All of the papers offered in these sessions are published in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (Brill, 2010), edited by Friesen Schowalter, and Walters. It is hoped that this initial collaboration between the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins and this group of scholars will continue.

**Conversation with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

On Friday evening and Saturday morning the Jesus Seminar turned its attention to the work of one of this generation’s most prolific and influential scholars of Christian origins, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. For more than three decades she has been at work re-shaping our discussions with a simple, but revolutionary, principle: that women matter just as much as men. Her breakthrough book, *In Memory of Her* (1983), has proven to be a watershed in scholarship. If the texts of the New Testament were written by and for men, then, she argues, one must learn to look behind the text, to read between the lines to discover the contributions and struggles of the other half of humanity. Schüssler Fiorenza was interviewed about her life and work by Hal Taussig, her longtime friend and colleague. Taussig was able to draw her out on *In Memory of Her*, but also her later, and arguably more important work, especially in *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (2000). It was in this book that Schüssler Fiorenza made some of her most critical remarks about the work of the Jesus Seminar itself. She has always maintained that the Seminar, through its procedure of voting, tried to erect a facade of objectivity and scientific disinterest. For her part, Schüssler Fiorenza has always advocated a more passionate, interested and ethically committed scholarship. Every act of interpretation has a context; it is that context that determines the value of an interpretation.

The conversation that began on Friday evening continued on Saturday morning with four presentations from former students and colleagues of Schüssler Fiorenza: Taussig, Shelly Matthews, Anna Miller, and Barbara Rossing. Rossing departed from the meeting’s main themes to remind us that Schüssler Fiorenza’s first contributions were in the study of the Book of Revelation, which proved equally revolutionary. But Miller and Matthews pressed the issue of method and the extent to which the Jesus Seminar was guilty of the kind of objectivism that Schüssler Fiorenza has consistently opposed. This produced perhaps the most lively and pointed exchange of the weekend as Fellows of the Seminar took up the debate as well. Taussig, who has been a regular at the Seminar for all of its twenty-five years, recalled that the Jesus Seminar had always refused to deal substantively with issues of method, and had been especially remiss in ignoring Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique. But others pushed back, arguing that the act of voting was not a scientific activity, but a democratic one. The process was an attempt not to display a false objectivity, but to be transparent about its subjectivity. What remains on the table, however, is Schüssler Fiorenza’s point that all scholarship needs to be committed. What are the commitments of the Jesus Seminar?