Preface

More than thirty years ago, in *The First Urban Christians*, Wayne Meeks struck a new note in the study of early Christ assemblies, focusing attention on devotees of Christ as residents in the major cities of the Roman Empire. This brought an engagement with what I call the "materiality" of the early Christ cult—the demographics of the Jesus movement, the main social and economic catchments of its members, models of governance, and the practices in which Christ followers engaged, including water rituals, communal meals, and collection of funds. Only in his last chapter did Meeks engage with what up to that point had been the major preoccupation of the study of the Jesus movement: its beliefs and confessions.

Since Meeks wrote his book we know much more about the associative practices of other small, face-to-face groups in Greek and Roman antiquity. These associations organized around the workplace, the cult of a deity, a diasporic identity, an extended family, or a neighborhood and could be found in practically every city and town of the Mediterranean. For the nonelite population, associations were the principal context for social, cultic, and other forms of interaction beyond the family on one hand and the citizen assembly in free Greek cities on the other.

Data about these groups have never been employed systematically and carefully as *comparanda* for early Christ assemblies, although since the late nineteenth century there have been a few gestures in this direction. While knowledge about Greek and Roman associations does not in itself produce any new data about Christ groups, comparison offers two benefits. First, since much is known about a variety of features and practices of those groups that is *not* known about Christ groups—membership size and profile, recruitment prac-

tices, governance, finances, and the relation to the cities in which they were resident—we can use data from associations heuristically to raise questions about Christ assemblies: What options were available for monitoring membership? Were membership lists kept, as they were in most other associations? When early texts speak of someone leaving a group or being expelled, what concretely is imagined? How were meals financed? In Christ assemblies that included elite or subelite individuals, how do we imagine their relationships to others in the group? Why do Christ groups imitate political language, calling the group an *ekklēsia*, the standard Greek term for a citizen assembly, or addressing Jesus as *kyrios* and speaking of his parousia? The use of *comparanda* from the rich data set supplied from associations allows the scholar to ask questions that hitherto have not been asked about Christ groups and to at least sketch the parameters of answers to these questions.

A second benefit of careful comparison is the ability to set some boundaries to our imagination of what was possible and likely for Christ assemblies. If the mean membership size of Greek and Roman cultic associations was about thirty people, how much larger can we reasonably imagine Christ groups to have been? What models are attested for financing the communal meals of associations, and how then might we reconstruct the financing of Christ groups? Having knowledge of the practices of other small face-to-face associations allows us to move from speculative scenarios about what *might* have been the case to documented possibilities. This is a matter of "normalizing" our reconstructions of the earliest Christ assemblies—that is, treating them as phenomena that belong to the spectrum of social practices of the ancient Mediterranean instead of exoticizing them as something unparalleled, incomparable, and sui generis.

Some readers will find this book irritating, for at least three reasons. First, in contrast to many works on the earliest Christ assemblies, I emphasize the ways in which Christ assemblies were comparable with other small face-to-face groups. The habit of much scholarship has been to dramatize the extent to which Christ assemblies (and Judean assemblies) were unique. Anxiety over identity is only heightened when pagan analogies are adduced. Hence, some readers may be distressed to learn that these assemblies were not as unusual, either demographically or in terms of their practices, as is often supposed.

It is not that I claim that Christ assemblies were just like other associations. That would be silly. Guilds and associations were extremely diverse, with hardly two of them exactly alike. But the claim that Christ groups were incomparable and incommensurable is not only historically untrue, it probably disguises a theological rather than a historical presumption that Christ devotees must have been up to something that was completely new and unparalleled and ul-

timately the result of divine causality. There are indeed some very interesting innovations of Christ assemblies and ways that their practices stood out from the practices of other comparable groups. The benefit of careful comparison that identifies similarities is that it in fact allows the differences to stand out with special prominence. But to ignore similarities and exaggerate differences obscures the many ways that Christ assemblies were also like other groups. It risks turning historiography into apologetics.

Second, it is common to insist that the most proximate *comparanda*—sometimes the only salient ones—for early Christ groups are Judean synagogues and their practices, from which Christ groups derived most of their practices and beliefs. This, as Jonathan Z. Smith observed in *Drudgery Divine*, is often a strategy to isolate the early Christ cult from its Greco-Roman environment, from which is was supposedly "overwhelmingly different." But then it is claimed that early Christ groups swiftly outstripped their Judean roots or even consciously distinguished themselves from those roots. Hence, in two swift moves the Christ cult becomes sui generis.

This too is apologetics, not historiography. I will avoid this approach, not because Judean synagogues were not important in the world in which Christ groups operated. Various iterations of the Christ cult owed much to Judean synagogues. The letter of James, for example, calls its meeting a *synagōgē*, a common term used by Judean assemblies, and it reflects a version of the Christ cult that saw itself as fully embedded in diasporic Judaism. Paul's identity as a diasporic Judean and his frequent interactions with other Judeans meant that the shape of his thought is influenced by Judean conceptual frameworks. Others still, such as the author of the letter to the Hebrews, invoked models of priesthood and sacrifice from the Hebrew Bible in order to advance the claim that a more perfect form of priesthood and sacrifice had appeared in Christ. Meanwhile, the author of the Letter of Barnabas constructed much of his letter around the thesis that the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible had been misunderstood by Judeans and was available only to Christ followers. Thus, the Hebrew Bible and Judaism loom large in the construction and self-understanding of Christ assemblies.

Despite these factors, I avoid the habit of privileging Judaism and Judean forms as the "closest" or "best" parallels for Christ groups. In some cases, they are not. For some of the arguments in this book membership lists and data on the financial practices of groups will be important. These are simply unavailable for Judean assemblies. Those assemblies doubtless had membership lists, and they certainly had practices to finance their meetings, meals, and burials. But we don't have those records, probably for reasons of preservation. The

physical remains of synagogues may provide a rough index to group size, and these will be considered alongside the physical remains of buildings used by Greek and Roman associations, without necessarily privileging one *comparandum* over another (chapter 3). The presence of *triclinia* associated with some synagogues suggests that like Greek and Roman associations, Judean assemblies engaged in communal dining.

A second reason that I avoid privileging Judean assemblies as the "closest" *comparanda* is because this is not a book about origins and "influence." The point of comparison is heuristic—to allow us to see interpretive possibilities and to establish some boundaries for our historical imaginations. As the Introduction shows, useful *comparanda* may have no genealogical relationship at all to the feature under scrutiny and may yet let us see helpful interpretive possibilities.

The tendency to divide data into three piles—"Christ assemblies," "Judean assemblies," and "Greco-Roman associations"—invites the temptation to play one group off against another. Yet as I have said, "Greco-Roman" associations are extremely diverse. I propose some loose and broad heuristic categories, including "occupational guilds" and "cultic associations." For analytic purposes, many Judean assemblies can be treated as an instance of the latter category, although they could also be treated as "diasporic associations," and as Thomas Kraabel has shown, there are significant differences among Judean assemblies. It is absurd to set Judean assemblies contrastively against "Greco-Roman associations" as if these were natural and self-evident categories, since there is so much variation within each group. Comparative analysis looks for *limited* and *local* comparisons that enlighten particular features of a Christ group. Useful *comparanda* will sometimes be found in a feature of an Attic association that has no conceivable genealogical relation to the Christ group, sometimes in a particular Judean assembly, and sometimes in a Roman collegium. To reiterate the main point: the goal of comparison is heuristic, not genealogical.

The third feature that might irritate readers is the lack of attention that I pay to the theology of Christ assemblies, for surely, the argument might go, the successes and lasting importance of Christ groups had everything to do with the ideas that they espoused—the proclamation of the crucified Messiah, the message of God's grace, and the expectations of a dramatic eschatological transformation of the cosmos. It is not that such ideas are not important and noteworthy. The historical question is whether they have any demonstrable relation to many of the questions with which this book is concerned: the demographics of early Christ assemblies, the size and venues of these groups, an understanding of social dynamics involved in the rituals in which they engaged, and their fi-

nancing. It might be supposed that beliefs played a critical role in recruitment: Who would not be attracted to a group that promised redemption from the world, transformation in an afterlife, and participation in the judgment of the world? Yet as Ramsay MacMullen has shown, conversion had little to do with persuading converts of the truth of doctrines and beliefs and much more to do with witnessing wonders and establishing trust. Rodney Stark has persuasively documented in relation to the recruitment strategies of modern cults that the particular—even peculiar—beliefs of modern cults are usually *not* the reasons for the initial attraction of recruits to the group, although converts routinely report *after* conversion that they joined having recognized that those beliefs were obviously true. Recruitment has more to do with affect and the sense of belonging and trust that these groups generate and advertise to potential recruits.

This is not to dismiss or denigrate the ideas purveyed by Christ assemblies as epiphenomenal. As I suggest in chapter 11, the intellectual activities of Christ assemblies are clearly one of their signal *differentiae*. These groups were early adopters of bookish practices—preserving and creating knowledge derived from books, at first the Jewish Scriptures and then their own writings, and forming what Brian Stock in his discussion of medieval groups has called textual communities. The bookish practices of early Christ groups may have had special appeal to the literate elite, who treated the possession and use of reading materials as a marker of elite culture. For the majority, the greatest appeal that Christ groups had was the "trust network" that they represented, the offer of a strong sense of belonging, and group recognition and esteem for moral and other forms of achievement.

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