

Earliest Christian Asceticism & the Early Christian Family

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RESUMEN En este artículo se combinan dos enfoques analíticos que suelen ser tratados por separado, los que son la familia cristiana y el ascetismo cristiano primitivo. Se busca mostrar aquí cómo los dos puedan informarse mutuamente. Los textos analizados son el documento 'Q', los escritos 'auténticos' de Pablo, y el evangelio de Marcos. La postura ascética de cada uno de esos tres proyectos queda comprobada por su discurso en contra de la vida familiar convencional. Después, se fija en el hecho paradójico de que, en cada uno de los mismos discursos, se promueve una vida familiar alternativa. A modo de conclusión, se propone que estos tres modelos de otra vida familiar bien podrían servir para rectificar el concepto científico de 'religión doméstica' en la antigüedad.

PALABRAS CLAVE ascetismo, familia alternativa, Pablo, Mc, Q.

SUMMARY *This article brings together two topics typically discussed separately – early Christian asceticism and the early Christian family – and seeks to show how each may illuminate the other. Analyzed are three discrete discourses of the New Testament: namely, the synoptic sayings source 'Q', the writings of the historical Paul, and the Gospel of Mark. First, the ascetical stance of each is demonstrated through its anti-(conventional) family rhetoric. Then, the paradoxical fact of another kind of family life promoted by the same discourses is explored. In conclusion, it is suggested that such ascetical early Christian families represent a promising site for rectification of the scholarly category of "domestic religion" in antiquity.*

KEY WORDS *asceticism, alternative family, Paul, Mk, Q.*

INTRODUCTION

Research-to-date on the early Christian family typically has not found it to be significantly different from other ancient Mediterranean families¹. More than

1 See, e.g., C. OSIEK – D. L. BALCH, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville 1997) viii, 102.

one instance of earliest Christian asceticism, however, suggests that this may not be an adequate conclusion. At the same time, research on early Christian asceticism typically has not included the early Christian family among its topics for discussion. Sexual renunciation, of course, has been routinely rehearsed but as though “no sex” necessarily meant “no family.” This strikes me as a dubious assumption or, at least, one that remains untested. On both sides of the ledger, therefore, there may be something to be learned by bringing the two issues together.

In this article, I discuss three examples of earliest Christian asceticism. These are all taken from the New Testament for reasons that have mainly to do with my own area of expertise; although this focus also enables the ideological critique of current scholarly practice, which is a sub-theme of the essay². I make the following assumptions.

First, I assume that earliest Christianity was ascetical in more than one of its inaugural manifestations³. Specifically, I take the synoptic sayings source Q⁴, the writings of the historical Paul⁵ and the Gospel of Mark⁶ all to be ‘ascetical’ in one way or another. To be sure, this is neither a sufficient nor an exclusive description of any one of these socio-rhetorical projects nor does the term ‘ascetical’ mean exactly the same thing in each case. Nonetheless, the category

2 For the Gospel of Thomas, see A. F. J. KLUN, “The ‘Single One’ in the Gospel of Thomas”: *JBL* 81 (1962) 271-278; R. URO, “Asceticism and Anti-Familial Language in the Gospel of Thomas”, en: HALVOR MOXNES (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London 1997) 216-234; A. D. JACOBSON, “Jesus Against the Family: The Dissolution of Family Ties in the Gospel Tradition”, en: J. M. ASGERSSON – K. DE TROYER – M. W. MEYER (eds.), *From Quest to Q: Festschrift James M. Robinson* (Leuven 2000) 189-218, pp. 210-217.

3 See L. E. VAAGE – V. L. WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York 1999).

4 See G. KRETSCHMAR, “Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Ursprung frühchristlicher Askese”: *ZTK* 61 (1964) 27-67; S. J. PATTERSON, “Askesis and the Early Jesus Tradition”, en: VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 49-69.

5 See V. L. WIMBUSH, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding according to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon 1987); P. BROWN, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York 1988) 44-57; D. BOYARIN, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley 1994); *Id.*, “Body Politic among the Brides of Christ: Paul and the Origins of Christian Sexual Renunciation”, en: V. L. WIMBUSH – R. VALANTASIS – G. L. BYRON – W. S. LOVE (eds.), *Asceticism* (New York 1995) 459-478; also the different essays in VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 159-251.

6 See L. E. VAAGE, “En otra casa: el discipulado en Marcos como ascetismo doméstico”: *EstB* 63 (2005) 21-42.

of asceticism remains, in my opinion, the best theoretical frame of reference within which to describe the specific type of counter-cultural stance and alternate life-project embodied by the implied subjects of each of these texts or group of texts. Moreover, this stance and life-project were equally constitutive of each.

Asceticism as I use the term in this article is, admittedly and quite properly, a 'vague' category⁷. To complain as some scholars have done about the lack of a more specific or comprehensive or commonly-held definition of the term as a reason for rejecting its use altogether is, to my mind, not germane⁸. Such a complaint demands a level of precision, which actually excludes ever using the term⁹. At the same time, I take asceticism to denote a more specific style of activity than some recent theories and definitions appear to suggest¹⁰.

It is important, in my opinion, not to presume that asceticism essentially or exclusively refers to the specific behaviours of sexual renunciation, fasting, or other such habits of self-denial; although, to be sure, these are often ascetical activities¹¹. The word 'asceticism' is itself derived from the Greek verb *askein*, which originally referred to different types of physical and, then, moral or personal training¹². Cross-culturally, one of the reasons why it has not been possible to find a one-size-fits-all definition of asceticism (at least regarding

7 See A. J. SALDARINI, "Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew", en: VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 11-27, pp. 13-18; R. C. NEVILLE, *Normative Cultures* (Albany 1995) 59-84. For the following explanation, see also L. E. VAAGE, "An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism": *CBO* (forthcoming).

8 See, e.g., M. A. TOLBERT, "Asceticism and Mark's Gospel", en: VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 29-48, pp. 30-32.

9 Cf. J. S. KLOPPENBORG VERBIN, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Edinburgh 2000) 420-444, regarding critique of the Cynic analogy to Q.

10 See, e.g., R. VALANTASIS, "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism", en: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 544-552; *Id.*, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism": *JAAR* 63 (1995) 775-821; *Id.*, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene 2008), esp. pp. 101-116; also G. G. HARPHAM, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago 1987).

11 Cf. BROWN, *Body and Society*; also T. K. SEIM, "Ascetic Autonomy? New Perspectives on Single Women in the Early Church": *ST* 43 (1989) 125-140; *EAD.*, "Children of the Resurrection: Perspectives on Angelic Asceticism in Luke-Acts", en: VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 115-125, esp. p. 116.

12 See M. FOUCAULT, *The Use of Pleasure* (The History of Sexuality 2; New York 1985) 72-77; J. PINSENT, "Ascetic Moods in Greek and Latin Literature", en: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 211-219.

specific behaviours) is the differing theoretical interpretations of the precise goal of this kind of rigorous education and the best practical means by which to achieve it¹³. At the same time, there is enough of a ‘family resemblance’ between these diverse efforts of avoidance and enjoyment to suggest that they may all quite properly be called ascetical¹⁴.

In my opinion, there are two key aspects that together define all ascetical activity. These represent, if you will, the constitutive antinomy or founding paradox of asceticism as such. These are, on the one hand, a decided rejection of the world as it is as normative or ever being able to provide for the experience of a sufficient satisfaction, viz. human happiness (*contemptus mundi*)¹⁵; and, on the other hand, an insistence on discovering and enjoying always within this world that which is desired, precisely in the body of the ascetic, as the result of observing one or another disciplinary regime. The latter would be what impedes the former from becoming simply suicidal or schizoid¹⁶.

The second of these two aspects is, perhaps, the most important. For if the first – a decided rejection of the world as it is as normative – could apply equally well to other traditions of social resistance such as, for example, apocalyptic or martyrdom, the second – enjoying what is desired in the enduring body of the practitioner – plainly does not. For this reason, in my

13 Perhaps the most obvious example is the intentional use of sexual intercourse in Tantric asceticism versus its renunciation in other ascetical traditions. See W. O. KAELBER, “Asceticism”, en: *The Encyclopedia of Religion* I (Detroit 2005) 526-530, p. 529.

14 For “family resemblance” as a comparative category, see L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford 21958) 65-68.

15 For *contemptus mundi* as an analytical framework, see V. L. WIMBUSH, “Contemptus Mundi: The Social Power of an Ancient Rhetoric and Worldview”: *USQR* 47/1-2 (1993) 1-13; *ib.*, “Contemptus Mundi – Redux: The Politics of an Ancient Rhetoric and Worldview”, en: C. L. RIGBY (ed.), *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology* (Studies in Theological Education; Atlanta 1997) 263-280. For the history of the concept as such, see R. BULTOT, *La Doctrine du mépris du monde* (Louvain 1963-1964); *ib.*, “Les Philosophes du paganisme. Docteurs et exemples du *contemptus mundi* pour la morale médiévale”, en: S. KUTTNER – A. M. STICKLER (eds.), *Mélanges G. Fransen I* (Studia gratiana 19-20; Rome 1976) 101-122; J. DELUMEAU, *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident (XIIIe – XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris 1983), esp. pp. 15-33. A notable example is the mediaeval satirical poem edited by R. E. PEPIN, *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny’s De Contemptu Mundi* (Mediaeval Texts and Studies 8; East Lansing 1991).

16 Although nothing, of course, is able to prevent a priori neurotic or psychotic behavior. See L. E. VAAGE, “Ascetic Moods, Hermeneutics, and Bodily Deconstruction”, en: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 246-263, pp. 256-260.

opinion, it is always the combination of the two elements that makes a given social practice or perspective properly ascetical – again, however varied the concrete details of abnegation and embrace then may be.

Once more, I underscore that the ascetical wager is not principally a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ but, rather, the effort to live ‘against the grain’ of whatever is taken to be distractingly or deceptively normative in a given cultural setting, in order to experience here and now, in the singular body of the ascetic, a better, viz. larger life¹⁷.

Second, the ascetical stance of my three examples – Q, Paul, and Mark – is, perhaps, most apparent in the anti- (conventional) family rhetoric exhibited by each. To be a disciple of Jesus in Q, to enter into the kingdom of God in Mark, to devote oneself to “the things of the Lord” for Paul (1Cor 7:32), it is deemed either necessary or decidedly advantageous to separate from one’s ordinary family and to abstain from any further participation in this customary way of life. This applies especially to the practice of heterosexual marriage; which, in turn, implies the production of children, or procreation, as well as the possibility of divorce.

Third, on the basis of these two assumptions one could think, as indeed many scholars apparently have, that earliest Christian asceticism most likely had nothing at all to do with the early Christian family. In fact, the mere idea of an early Christian family appears to negate, by definition, the possibility of a radically different kind of earthly existence; which, again, I take to be the principal goal of asceticism (including a number of earliest Christianities). Nonetheless, because, once more, asceticism never is suicide, either individually or socially; and because, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has shown, there is

17 Cf. D. B. MARTIN, “Introduction”, en: D. B. MARTIN – P. C. MILLER (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies* (Durham – London 2005) 1-21, pp. 13-16; also R. A. F. THURMAN, “Tibetan Buddhist Perspectives on Asceticism”, en: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 108-118; W. C. BUSHELL, “Psychophysiological and Comparative Analysis of Ascetico-Meditational Discipline: Toward a New Theory of Asceticism”, in: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 553-575. This may involve “shrinking the self.” See B. J. MALINA, “‘Let Him Deny Himself’ (Mark 8:34 & Par.): A Social Psychological Model of Self-Denial”: *BTB* 24 (1994) 106-119; *Id.*, “Pain, Power, and Personhood: Ascetic Behavior in the Ancient Mediterranean”, en: WIMBUSH – VALANTASIS (eds.), *Asceticism*, 162-177.

always the return of the repressed in the practice of asceticism¹⁸ - or because asceticism like other socially subversive practices is, properly speaking, parasitical¹⁹; earliest Christian asceticism included activities and required conditions, not least of all in its anti-(conventional) family posture, which minimally allow for a different experience of the early Christian family.

In what follows, therefore, I focus on those aspects of Q, Paul, and Mark, in which a certain reconfiguration of the early Christian family life seems to be imagined or implied. Obviously, I disagree strongly with Stephen C. Barton when he writes: “My own view is that the ‘anti-family’ material in the Gospels is primarily a rhetorically powerful metaphorical way of calling for the displacement of every obstacle to true discipleship of Jesus in the light of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God”²⁰. At the same time, I leave unaddressed the question to which degree and in which form such primordially reconfigured families endured, if at all; and if they did not, also the question why the early Christian family subsequently proved to be so intractable to on-going innovation and reinvention²¹.

18 See above, n. 10.

19 Cf. MARTIN, “Introduction”, 16. For a discussion of the term ‘parasite’ both in antiquity and in modern biology, see J. Z. SMITH, “What a Difference a Difference Makes”, en: *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago 2004) 251-302, esp. pp. 253-258, 274-276.

20 See S. C. BARTON, “The Relativisation of Family Ties in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman Traditions”, en: H. MOXNES (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London 1997) 81-100, p. 81; also *Id.*, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge 1994).

21 I would ask the following questions: On what basis do we conclude that the early Christian family was essentially identical with other family life in antiquity? What kind(s) of historical reconstruction do our sources properly allow or support? How should we interpret whatever is not said or recorded in this evidence? What else would we need to know – what other evidence is desirable – in order to give a complete account of the early Christian family? Are the registers used to evaluate family life sufficient or even appropriate to describe the actual experience of the early Christian family? What is at stake – both gained and lost – by concluding that there was essentially no difference between the early Christian family and other traditions of domestic life in antiquity?

EARLIEST CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM AS ANTI- (CONVENTIONAL) FAMILY

There are quite a few overtly anti- (conventional) family statements in Q²². The document begins with a forceful – even spiteful – rejection of the social identity that a given bloodline or family-based ‘ethnicity’ customarily gave in antiquity. The text’s initial speaker virulently insists: “Produce, then, fruit worthy of repentance and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as father’. For I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones” (Q 3:8). From the divine perspective the speaker here purports to represent, one’s earthly progenitor and a piece of rock would be essentially equivalent.

Similar disparagement of the importance of one’s parents and other family members include the well-known saying on the priorities of discipleship: “Another said to him, ‘Sir, permit me first to go and bury my father’. But he said to him, ‘Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead’” (Q 9:59-60). Again: “Do you think that I came to cast peace on the earth? I did not come to cast peace but a sword. For I came to divide son against father, and daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Q 12:51-53). And again: “The one who does not hate his father and mother cannot be my disciple ...” (Q 14:26).

In all of these sayings, a clear line of demarcation is drawn between the usual identification with one’s family of origin or through marriage and following (the counsel of) Jesus (and John). Likewise, if Gerd Theissen is correct – and, in my opinion, he is – that the various instructions exemplifying love of enemies in Q 6:27-35 would be a recipe for prompt extinction under the usual conditions governing life in a conventional ‘sedentary’ household, implied by these instructions is not only an originally ‘itinerant’ *Sitz im Leben*

22 All translations of Q into English are my own, based upon the reconstruction and translation into Spanish by L. E. VAAGE – J. PIXLEY, “El Evangelio radical de Galilea: la fuente sinóptica Q”: *RIBLA* 22 (1996) 153-161. Cf. J. M. ROBINSON – P. HOFFMANN – J. S. KLOPPENBORG – M. C. MORELAND (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q* (Minneapolis and Leuven 2000); *El “Documento Q” en griego y en español con paralelos del Evangelio de Marcos y del Evangelio de Tomás* (Salamanca 2002); S. GUIJARRO OPORTO, *Dichos primitivos de Jesús: una introducción al “proto-evangelio de dichos Q”* (Salamanca 2004) 99-121.

but also (pace Theissen) a clear separation by those who enacted them from this sort of social existence²³.

Other sayings in Q do not speak so directly against the family but also imply a deep divide between the kind of life heralded here in the name (or wake) of Jesus and the usual kind of ancient household. Thus, for example, the saying that immediately precedes Jesus' dismissal of the standard duty to give proper burial to one's father (Q 9:59-60) makes clear the conditions of this possibility: "Someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go'. And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'" (Q 9:57-58). This practice of a homeless existence, just as the love of enemies, presupposes a break with conventional family life. It registers a refusal to continue doing what otherwise was deemed to be both normal and necessary for human beings.

In the same vein, Arland D. Jacobson suggests as also indicative of an anti-(conventional) family stance in Q a number of additional statements²⁴. The full range of ancient family life, from daily and yearly provisioning to divorce and remarriage, is depicted in these sayings as either unnecessary or misguided. Thus, for example, one is told: "Do not carry a purse or bag or sandals or staff, and greet no one underway" (Q 10:4). And: "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into storehouses, and God feeds them. Are you not worth more than the birds? ... Learn from the lilies, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed as one of these" (Q12:22-31). Also: "No one can be a slave to two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and will despise the other. You cannot be a slave to God and Mammon" (Q 16:13). Finally: "Everyone who divorces his wife commits

23 See G. THEISSEN, "Nonviolence and Love of Our Enemies (Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-38): The Social Background", en: *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis 1992) 115-156. Cf. A. MILAVEC, "The Social Setting of 'Turning the Other Cheek' and 'Loving One's Enemies' in Light of the Didache": *BTB* 25 (1995) 131-143.

24 See JACOBSON, "Jesus Against the Family", 190-191, 195-198. In addition to the following sayings, *ibid.*, 191 n. 6 also mentions Q 14:20.

adultery; and the one who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery” (Q 16:18).

The practice of exorcism is lampooned in Q by making it a case of good housekeeping with disastrous effect: “Whenever the unclean spirit leaves a person, it wanders through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. It then says, ‘I will return to my house whence I departed’. When it comes, it finds it swept and in order. It then goes and brings with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself and entering, they dwell there; and the last state of that person becomes worse than it was before” (Q 11:24-26). Similarly, the most common activities of the ordinary household – eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage – are made the prelude to cataclysmic disaster: “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be when the Son of Man ... they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark and the flood came and took them all” (Q 17:26-27). Far from enabling human life to continue and flourish, these basic features of the daily round in most ancient families constitute, in the eyes of the synoptic sayings source, a scenario of inevitable collapse.

Thus it strikes me as impossible to say with Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch that “Q relativizes family without being antifamily”²⁵. Instead, it seems to me necessary to affirm that, in Q, the usual understanding of the significance and claim of one’s family of origin is repeatedly and flatly opposed.

Likewise in the writings of the historical Paul it is possible to find similar pronouncements that are anti- (conventional) family. Various statements in 1 Corinthians 7 provide the most obvious instance of “Paul, the worldly ascetic”²⁶. These statements include the formula cited (or coined) by Paul in the chapter’s opening verse: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (1Cor 7:1) as well as the apostle’s own personal example and preference for others: “I wish that all were as I myself am. ... To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (1Cor 7:7-8). Fur-

²⁵ See OSIEK – BALCH, *Families in the New Testament World*, 126.

²⁶ See above, n. 5. All translations of texts from the letters of Paul and from the Gospel of Mark are those of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless otherwise indicated.

thermore, consider Paul's default solution to a failed marriage: "...but if [a woman] does [separate from her husband] let her remain single..." (1Cor 7:11); and, finally, Paul's well-known, if seldom heeded, assessment of the best thing to do in the face of the present state of the world:

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. ... Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none ... For the form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. If any one thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry – it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So that he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I have the Spirit of God²⁷.

²⁷ See 1Cor 7:25-40; I have kept the RSV translation of 7:36-38, since it expresses well enough my main point here, although otherwise it is hardly certain.

Plainly, Paul is profoundly ambivalent about the benefits of marriage and the customary demands of ordinary family life for those who have been incorporated into Christ. What is certainly better to do, if at all possible, is never to marry or never again. The fact that Paul does not promote divorce – a feature of 1 Corinthians 7 to which I shall return below – does not diminish in the least Paul's evident sense of the single life as the most promising way to live the “new creation” that would be life “in Christ”.

Likewise in the Gospel of Mark, early Christian discipleship begins by rejecting the customary obligations and benefits of conventional family life²⁸. Following Jesus means, initially, leaving home. The first thing Jesus does (after the prologue in 1:1-13, 14-15) is to break up a couple of family businesses by calling Peter and Andrew, James and John, to follow him. When Peter later recalls (10:28) that “we have left everything and followed you,” Jesus' initial response underscores the domestic profile of “everything” (10:29-31). Discipleship in Mark starts by breaking the customary link to one's carnal family.

Similarly in the scene that follows the attempt by Jesus' earthly family to seize him, “for they were saying that he's crazy” (3:21; my translation), Jesus responds by disqualifying any such claim on the basis of blood. Shamelessly Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother’” (3:33-35)²⁹.

The same point is driven home, albeit inversely, when Jesus returns “to his own country; and his disciples followed him” (6:1). This is where Jesus would have been known, as everyone else in the ancient Mediterranean world, first and foremost through his kin. Hence the question asked by the neighbours: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (6:3). Jesus concludes: “A prophet is not without honour except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (6:4). Thus following Jesus means,

²⁸ I rehearse the same argument in “An Other Home.”

²⁹ Note the absence of any reference to Jesus' father in Mark 3:33-35; 6:3 as well as the absence of any reference to “fathers” in 10:30.

in Mark, first leaving home, if this is only because Jesus' home town is the one place in the first half of the gospel where the Son of God can find no welcome due to the constraints of the usual social imagination³⁰.

EARLIEST CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM AS OTHER HOME

However striking and strident such anti- (conventional) family rhetoric may be, the early Christian project that the Gospel of Mark articulates did not simply propose 'dropping out' of ancient society. It also entailed an effort at alternate social construction. In the Gospel of Mark, this is configured precisely as entrance into another kind of household. The domestic asceticism heralded here defines, in fact, another sort of early Christian family³¹.

Although programmatically dissociated from ordinary family life, sometimes because already socially marginalized, Jesus and his first followers nonetheless continue to inhabit the institution of the ancient household in Mark, however surprising and even contradictory such a statement might appear. Thus, for example, despite the fact that Peter and his brother Andrew abandoned their nets to follow Jesus just as shortly after them also James and John the sons of Zebedee do the same, forsaking their father in the boat with the hired help; it is not very long before all four men are said to enter once again into "the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John" (1:29) where Simon's mother-in-law is lying sick (1:30). After being healed, she then gets up to make them supper. Likewise, when the Gerasene demoniac, now recovered, begs Jesus "that he might be with him" (5:18), thus becoming one of his disciples, Jesus refuses the request but in turn commands him: "Depart to your house among your own people and proclaim to them what the Lord has done for you and [how] he has shown you mercy" (5:19; my translation). Similarly, the blind man at Bethsaida is directed home after he has been made,

30 Cf. H. MOXNES – J. BØRTNES – D. Ø. ENDSJØ (eds.), *Naturlig sex? Seksualitet og kjønn i den kristne antikken* (Oslo 2002).

31 Cf. JACOBSON, "Jesus Against the Family", 209-210. Again, I develop this argument in "An Other Home."

eventually, to see clearly. The text says that Jesus “sent him away to his home,” which then is clarified immediately to mean: “Do not even enter the village” (8:26). Evidently, home here is understood to represent (the possibility of) a different social space than the customary collective life of the local neighbourhood.

No longer welcome in his own native country (6:1, 4) among kin and at his paternal home (6:4) where his mother and brothers and sisters yet reside (6:3), Jesus in Mark nonetheless has other houses and households where he and his followers may abide. For example, Jesus enjoys a last moment of profound recognition “in the house of Simon the leper” (14:3) before the ensuing passion. Earlier, the Syrophenician woman found Jesus “in a house” he had entered near Tyre, vainly hoping to escape notice there (7:24)³². In Capernaum, Jesus seems to possess a domicile of his own³³.

Although less explicitly articulated, this domestic setting remains the place elsewhere in Mark where successful discipleship continues to unfold. The paralytic, for example, whom Jesus healed in Capernaum after he had been lowered down through a hole in the roof, is told to “rise, take up your pallet and go home” (2:11). Once Levi accepts Jesus’ command to follow him and abandoned his public post “at the tax office” (2:14), the immediate aftermath of this about-face into discipleship (2:14) takes place “in his house” (2:15). The Syrophenician woman, whom Jesus is compelled to acknowledge as a disciple of sorts, upon receipt of the benefit she was seeking from Jesus leaves for her home where she finds her child lying in bed, and the demon gone

32 It is noteworthy that the Gospel of Mark imagines Jesus as seeking refuge in domestic space and finding accommodation there apart from the hostility and obtuseness that otherwise surround him (cf. 10:10; also 5:38). I take this to be the significance of the statement made by Jesus, in response to Peter’s anxious inquiry, that all who have “abandoned house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the gospel” will receive, in return, “now at this time (*en tō kairō toutō*) houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields – [albeit] with harassment (*meta diōgmōn*) ...” (10:29-30).

33 See Mark 2:1, 15; 3:20; also, perhaps, 7:17; 9:28; further, E. S. MALBON, “‘Tē oikia autou: Mark 2.15 in Context’: NTS 31 (1985) 282-292; *EAD.*, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco 1986) 192 n. 28; A. MYRE, “Jésus avait-il une maison?”, en: J.-C. PETIT – A. CHARRON – A. MYRE (eds.), “Où demeures-tu?” (*Jn 1,38*): *La maison depuis le monde biblique* (Saint-Laurent 1994) 305-322, esp. pp. 313-317.

(7:30). Finally, it is “in the house of Simon the leper” (14:3) where an anonymous woman anoints Jesus’ head, who then praises her deed as the work of an exemplary disciple, worthy of remembrance wherever the gospel may be proclaimed “in the whole world” (14:9). Thus in Mark, the model for commendable discipleship and the concrete meaning of entrance into the Kingdom of God is the practice of an alternate domesticity.

Likewise in Corinth and, willy-nilly, also for Paul – albeit against the grain of his own preference – a number of different early Christian domesticities can be seen under construction³⁴. In this case, there are both the extraordinary early Christian families (some of) the Corinthians appear to have made for themselves, and the alternative alternate arrangement Paul proposes in his vacillating response to this “hotbed” of early Christian experimentation. I will focus here on Paul’s alternative alternate arrangement³⁵.

The main problem Paul faced in Corinth was coreligionists eager to put into practice his own fin de siècle rhetoric. These socially deviant confreres took up with enthusiasm and daring-do the apostle’s own challenge to live divinely – *kata pneuma* or ‘otherwise’ – in the face of customary expectations and conventional social mores. On more than one occasion, they appear to have been much more inventive in reconfiguring the early Christian family than Paul himself ever imagined possible, at least in the name of Christ³⁶.

34 Paul’s own preference, in my opinion, is inadequately described as either “accommodation” or “love patriarchy”.

35 For the possible self-understanding of the Corinthians, especially those in view in 1 Corinthians 5-6, see A. J. DROGE, “Discerning the Body: Early Christian Sex and Other Apocryphal Acts”, en: A. Y. COLLINS – M. M. MITCHELL (eds.), *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday* (Tübingen 2001) 297-320, esp. pp. 297-305.

36 This is not the interpretation of Jonathan Z. Smith who argues that (some of) the Corinthians simply had a different agenda from what Paul construed them to be doing. See J. Z. SMITH, “re: Corinthians”, en: *Relating Religion*, 340-361, esp. pp. 349-350. Smith stresses the incongruity of understandings regarding a shared vocabulary of *pneuma* and *gnōsis*. In fact, I am suggesting something similar regarding another aspect of Paul’s apostolic discourse, namely, holiness or withdrawal from ordinary social life with the additional, traditional scholarly claim that the Corinthians first received these ideas through Paul. Otherwise, why would they (or some of them) have looked to Paul for clarification and corroboration in this regard?

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, the infamous case of the man having the woman of his father – which so horrified Paul, but with which (some of) the Corinthians apparently were quite pleased, perhaps precisely because it was an arrangement “of a kind that is not found even among pagans,” which only bewildered Paul all the more – is, conceivably, one such effort to redefine the social relations at the heart of the ancient family³⁷. For Paul, of course, it was simply a case of *porneia* – end of question! His response was thus equally straightforward: “Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ... I have already pronounced judgment ... on the man who thus did this in the name of the Lord ... you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (5:2, 3-5; slightly modified RSV translation); “Drive out the wicked person from among you” (5:13). The fact, however, that Paul must mount the argument he weaves around this reiterated judgment makes it clear that his advice would not have been received as simply a statement of the obvious.

Porneia is Paul’s word for something others were viewing with pride of accomplishment. This is, perhaps, the reason for Paul’s description of the Corinthians as “arrogant” (1Cor 5:2) and boastful (1Cor 5:6). Most commentators on 1 Corinthians 5, nonetheless, still seem to take Paul’s word as though it were a description of the facts. In fact, Paul’s use of *porneia* to describe the relationship in question tells us next to nothing historically about whatever was going on, since it basically signifies only that Paul disapproved. The precise meaning of the term, which is to say the specific activity to which *porneia* concretely refers, depended largely upon the negative disposition of the speaker and/or governing social context vis-à-vis a given sexual practice.

The fierceness of Paul’s exclusion from further participation in the local Christian assembly not only of the man having the woman of his father but also, in 1 Corinthians 5:11, of “any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or rob-

³⁷ See Droge, “Discerning the Body,” 299. Cf. A. ROUSSELLE, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (Oxford 1988) 62; OSIEK – BALCH, *Families in the New Testament World*, 109-110, 113.

ber,” and again in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 of “the immoral ... idolaters ... adulterers ... sexual perverts ... thieves ... the greedy ... drunkards ... revilers ... robbers,” suggests that (some of) the households which made up the early Christian community in Corinth actually did include not a few persons of this sort³⁸. Paul’s claim that “such were some of you” – a condition which the apostle assumed should have been annulled once “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1Cor 6:11) – might better be translated, at least for the sake of social historical description: “such are some of you”³⁹.

In this case, (some) early Christian households in Corinth “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” appear to have been practicing *mutatis mutandis* the same sort of shameless liberality (viz. hospitality) otherwise associated with Jesus in the synoptic tradition. The interpretative situation here is not unlike the one regarding “the widows” against whom the author of 1 Timothy (5:3-16) later would rail, who appear to have been doing exactly what Paul earlier counselled the unmarried to do in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 25-40⁴⁰.

Other Corinthian households took off in a different direction, evidently more in line with Paul’s own preference. Unlike Paul, however, these early Christians sought to make of the practice of sexual renunciation or the principle that “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” a general programme of social reorientation, which they applied to existing households and their multiple relations⁴¹. Thus, husband and wife might continue to cohabit but

38 Cf. P. S. ZAAS, “Catalogues and Context: 1 Corinthians 5 and 6”: *NTS* 34 (1988) 622-629.

39 Otherwise, it is notable how both scholarly and general attention have tended to focus, almost exclusively, on the sexual components of these lists. One wonders what would have happened if the history of interpretation had taken as seriously, for example, Paul’s equally fierce exclusion of the “greedy” or “revilers”, or even of “drunkards” and “adulterers”, let alone the general claim at the beginning of 1Cor 6:9 that “the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God”.

40 Cf. S. DAVIES, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale 1980); D. R. MACDONALD, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia 1983); D. C. VERNER, *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* (Chico 1983); M. Y. MACDONALD, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge 1996) 127-182; G. C. STREETE, “Askesis and Resistance in the Pastoral Epistles”, in: VAAGE – WIMBUSH (eds.), *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 299-316, esp. pp. 303-304.

41 Cf. OSIEK – BALCH, *Families in the New Testament World*, 104-107.

no longer would engage in sexual intercourse with one another (anticipating the later Christian practice of so-called spiritual marriage)⁴². Or husband or wife, or both, would abandon the marital state altogether for the sake of living a decidedly single existence.

Regarding the latter possibility, Arland D. Jacobson has suggested something similar for the concrete meaning of the saying in Q 16:18, which reads: “Everyone who divorces his wife commits adultery; and the one who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery”⁴³. According to Jacobson, this saying actually presupposes that divorce has occurred (on the basis of Q 14:26) and aims to prohibit remarriage – in contrast to Paul’s defence of marriage (versus divorce) in 1 Corinthians 7:14, 16, although Paul would agree with Q in prohibiting remarriage (except with the first spouse) for those who do divorce⁴⁴. Similarly, slaves might seek or be given immediate manumission since the new Christian household was imagined to express, as thoroughly as possible, the experience of freedom “in Christ”.

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul seems to fear that such an effort to practice, collectively and consequentially, the life of holiness and quietness or complete disengagement from “the things of the world” which Paul otherwise promoted would prove to be ... what? too difficult? too disruptive? too desirable? to be able to be carried out successfully, which is to say unobtrusively? in an “orderly” manner? without attracting external critique and forced suppression? Whatever the reason may be, Paul’s response to this other sub-group of Corinthian Christians is interesting because, willy-nilly, the apostle’s calmative counsel ended up proposing yet another type of early Christian family.

Even if we were to conclude that Paul’s proposal never became a social fact beyond the textual tradition(s) in which it was inscribed and transmitted, it would still be necessary to include it in any social history of the early Chris-

42 Cf. BROWN, *Body and Society*, 96, 100-102; further, P. F. BEATRICE, “Continenza e matrimonio nel Cristianesimo primitivo”, en: R. CANTALAMESSA (ed.), *Etica sessuale e matrimonio nel cristianesimo delle origini* (Milano 1976) 3-68.

43 See JACOBSON, “Jesus Against the Family”, 198.

44 Neither Paul nor Q (16:18) makes any mention of the children a husband and wife would likely have produced already (cf. Mark 10:29).

tian family, since both utopian fantasies and textual traditions belong to everything that makes up the social ‘reality’ of a given time and place. Furthermore, the history of interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 certainly forms part of the larger history of the Christian family.

In 1 Corinthians 7, to be sure, Paul repeatedly strives to avoid explicit rupture with the surrounding social order, at least in the case of those already married. Thereby Paul himself certainly contributes directly to construction of the early Christian family as outwardly (socio-politically) continuous with other ancient Mediterranean families (see 1Cor 7:17, 20, 24). What exactly is imagined, however, by the same apostle as the ‘internal regulation’ of an early Christian family? Is it not an odd and, indeed, novel protocol Paul prescribes in 1 Corinthians 7 for conjugal life in such a household?⁴⁵

Consider, again, these well-known elements. First: “The husband should give to his wife her due, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does” (7:3-4; slightly modified RSV translation). What would that have looked like as domestic practice in antiquity? Was it ever tried? It has been tried, of course, many times partially, which is to say in one direction only: namely, “the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does.” This fact, however, does not erase the other half of the text, which states: “The husband should give to his wife her due ... the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.” If this has never been tried, why not? And if not, why did Paul ever think to utter such a statement, especially if we now deem it to have been so much nonsense?

Osiek and Balch claim that Paul is expressing “a Stoic idea opposed to the widespread patriarchal assumption that the man owns the woman, not vice versa”⁴⁶. The principal evidence for this assertion is the discussion in Plutarch

45 Cf. D. MARTIN, “Paul Without Passion? On Paul’s rejection of desire in sex and marriage”, en: MOXNES (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families*, 201-215. Certainly, Paul’s affirmation of ‘mixed’ marriage in 1Cor 7:12-16 hardly rehearses conventional wisdom. Cf. PLUTARCH, *Moralia* 140D; APULEIUS, *Metamorphoses* 9.14; PSEUDO-LUCIAN, *Amores* 42.

46 See OSIEK – BALCH, *Families in the New Testament World*, 115-116.

(Amatorius) about the relationship between friendship and sex, in which “Plutarch himself (766D-771C, esp. 769A,CD) argues against older views of friendship with boys and men that a wife is a suitable, more graceful, pleasurable, continuous, and constant friend”; and a statement by Musonius Rufus, which argues: “The husband and wife ... should come together for the purpose of making a life in common and of procreating children, and furthermore, of regarding all things in common between them, and nothing peculiar or private to one or the other, not even their own bodies”⁴⁷.

Neither Plutarch nor Rufus, however, would agree that, in Paul’s words, “the husband does not rule over his own body, but his wife does.” In fact, Plutarch argues against older views of friendship and sex with boys and men precisely for the sake of enhancing male self-control; and Rufus’ notion of “regarding all things in common between them,” including “not even their own bodies” as exempt from this rule, belongs to the discipline of discerning what is *adiaphoron* rather than practicing reciprocity.

Another suggestion by Paul is: “Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer ...” (1Cor 7:5). How long is “a season” (*pros kairon*)? And how often, and when, might a couple make such an agreement? Why does prayer require, or become better, through sexual abstinence “that you may devote yourselves” to it? What kind of prayer is this? Has Paul abandoned his earlier command in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that everyone should “pray unceasingly”? Or were the married normally understood to be excluded from such an experience?

Far more innovative and far-reaching than it might appear at first is the claim: “For the man who is *apistos* is sanctified through his wife, and the woman who is *apistos* is sanctified through the brother. Since therefore your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (1Cor 7:14; my translation)⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 115-116; further, D. L. BALCH, “1 Cor. 7:32-35 and Stoic Debates about Marriage, Anxiety, and Distraction”: JBL 102 (1983) 429-439; H.-J. KLAUCK, *Gemeinde zwischen Haus und Stadt: Kirche bei Paulus* (Freiburg 1992) 95-123.

⁴⁸ For further discussion of the peculiarities of this verse, see M. Y. MACDONALD – L. E. VAAGE, “Unclean but Holy Children: Paul’s Everyday Perplex in 1 Corinthians 7:14c”: CBQ (forthcoming); L. E. VAAGE, “The Translation of 1 Cor 7:14c and the Labile Social Body of the Pauline Church”: RB (forthcoming).

Last but hardly least, there is the inherently unsettling counsel: “From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it” (1Cor 7:29-31)⁴⁹.

With these observations, I am not suggesting that Paul had in mind a very clear or complete model of a different kind of early Christian family. Indeed, I am suggesting quite the opposite, namely, that the apostle hardly makes here a magisterial pronouncement. In my opinion, Paul neither intended to create “in Christ” a different kind of early Christian family nor did he work out most of the details that would be required in order to realize such a thing in practice. Instead, largely due to the fledgling efforts of other early Christians in Corinth, Paul became involved in a conversation about the specific social nature of the early Christian family and ad hoc, flip-flop, willy-nilly wobbled his way toward what emerges in 1 Corinthians 7 as a preliminary sketch of yet another type, viz. types of early Christian domesticity. The defining features of this family, to the degree that they are developed, could be described as a more measured dissociation from “the world” together with some sort of conjugal ‘mutuality’ and social-class ‘ecumenicity’.

It is less clear in Q than in either Paul or Mark that another (alternate) social configuration is projected (beyond dissociation from the prevailing order of things) for those persons whom the document would represent⁵⁰. Even so, the repeated reference in the text to God as Father (Q 10:21, 22; 11:2, 13; 12:30) and to those who claim him as the model for their own behaviour as “sons of God” (Q 6:35, 36; 10:22; 11:13) suggests that the original audience of these utterances was understood by their author(s) or compiler(s) to constitute some

49 See WIMBUSH, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic*, 23-47, 73-98.

50 Cf. P. KRISTEN, *Familie, Kreuz und Leben: Nachfolge Jesu nach Q und dem Markusevangelium* (Marburg 1995), esp. pp. 149-155, 229-234; A. D. JACOBSON, “Divided Families and Christian Origins”, in: R. A. PIPER (ed.), *The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (Leiden 1995) 361-380, esp. pp. 375-380; *ib.*, “Jesus Against the Family”, 190-202.

sort of 'fictive' family⁵¹. Moreover, as Jacobson observes: "The members of the group regarded each other as 'brothers' (Q 6:41-42; 17:3), and among them had already arisen some problems of living together such as spiritual direction (Q 6:41-42) and the limits of forgiveness (Q 17:3-4)"⁵².

If the conventional 'ethnic' identity bestowed through patrilineal descent – "We have Abraham as our father" (Q 3:8) – is rejected at the very beginning of the document, it is nonetheless imagined that something comparable, albeit divinely other, would replace it since: "I tell you that God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones" (Q 3:8; also 7:35; 13:34)⁵³. The Q people understood themselves to be, quite literally, of another generation. For this reason, the recipients of divine wisdom exalted in Q 10:21 are called "babies" (*nêpioi*) versus those conventionally taken, *in loco parentis*, to be "wise and understanding" (see also Q 7:35). For the same reason, the Q people were opposed to "this generation" (Q 7:31; 11:29, 31, 31; 11:51; also 3:7)⁵⁴.

In their own eyes, the Q people constituted a different, superior sort of social group because they were – they said – purveyors and practitioners of "something greater than (the wisdom of) Solomon" (Q 11:31) and "something greater than (the preaching of) Jonah" (Q 11:32). Therefore, in Q 10:22-24 the conviction is expressed of being uniquely endowed with a highly desirable – albeit heretofore unknown or unattained – good, namely, "all things." In Q 10:22 it is said that "no one (else) knows" these things except for the (divine) father and his (divine) family, who are the (divine) son plus the confraternity constituted by "to whomever the son wishes to reveal" this exclusive knowledge.

For this reason, we read immediately in Q 10:23-24: "Happy are the eyes that see what you see ... For I tell you that many prophets and kings

51 See JACOBSON, "Divided Families", 375-376; *Id.*, "Jesus Against the Family", 197, 199.

52 See JACOBSON, "Divided Families", 375.

53 See *ibid.*

54 Cf. D. LÜHRMANN, *Die Redaktion der Logienquelle* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1969). Otherwise, determining the precise identity of "this generation" in Q does not matter for my argument here, since it is only the sense of contrasting *geneai* implied by the expression "this generation" which I mean to underscore. Cf., further, M. JOHNSON – DEBAUFRÉ, *Jesus Among Her Children: Q, Eschatology, and the Construction of Christian Origins* (Cambridge 2005) 43-80, esp. pp. 78-80.

wanted to see what you see, and they did not see, and to hear what you hear, and they did not hear.” The shadowy, celestial figure of the Son of Man expresses the same claim to an absolutely alternative social identity (if this figure in Q effectively refers to Jesus, since everything that Jesus says and does in the document is equally applicable to those who are his disciples: see Q 6:35, 40; 9:57-58).

To be sure, as the Q people also were aware, they could be viewed as simply one more social subgroup of the “childish” (Q 10:21) “destitute” (Q 6:20b, *ptôchoi*) and other such disposable non-persons (Q 6:22-23). Nonetheless, the document asserts that everyone who practises its persuasion will be “like a house(hold) built on rock” (6:48) instead of sand. They shall be gathered together in a company of the divinely sheltered “as a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings,” under the auspices of whatever (or whomever) “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you” (13:34) is deemed to have disparaged and thus earned a contrary fate: “Behold, your house is taken away from you” (Q 13:35, *aphietai hymin ho oikos hymôn*).

Again, these assertions are hardly statements of the obvious. Many did not feel compelled to agree with such an evaluation. Certainly, the Pharisees did not (Q 11:39-52) nor did the households and the “cities” in which the proposals gathered together in Q appear to have met a swift and flat refusal (see Q 10:6b, 10-12, 13-15; also 6:22-23; 12:4-7, 8-9, 11-12). Nonetheless, a certain welcome or collaboration by the so-called “son[s] of peace” (see Q 10:6) was projected, at least during Q’s initial formation.

This last aspect would be what is correct in Gerd Theissen’s otherwise unwarranted assumption of sedentary sympathizers as functionally necessary counterpart to the wandering radicals that – Theissen proposes – were the original transmitters of many of the sayings in Q⁵⁵. Jacobson also refers to Q 7:6;

55 Cf. G. THEISSEN, “The Wandering Radicals: Light Shed by the Sociology of Literature on the Early Transmission of Jesus Sayings”, en: *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, 33-59, p. 50; *ib.*, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christians* (London 1978).

12:3, 42; 13:25-26, 29; 14:23 as further evidence, or intimations, that “households were the focus of activity” for the social project of these people⁵⁶. In addition, Jacobson writes: “There are hints too that meals may have been important times of gathering (Q 7:34; 10:7; 12:42; 13:29; 14:21-24), but no indication that these were ritual meals”⁵⁷.

Certainly the instructions not to worry about what to eat or wear (Q 12:22-31), what to say in self-defence (Q 12:11-12), and how to deal with death-threats (Q 12:4-7), all betray a level of confidence in the ability of those who practiced such a wisdom to survive the everyday challenges of life and even to thrive in the face of them; which, in turn, implies some underlying prospect of on-going viability. And so one might begin to wonder what exactly the social shape of this heterodox family arrangement was⁵⁸. In order to do so, however, it will be necessary not to write it immediately out of erstwhile existence by declaring the abiding traces of such a possibility at best a failed fantasy and, in any case, inconsequential for historical description because it never became culturally dominant or pervasive. Instead, I suggest, we still need to learn, both sociologically and historiographically, how to honour these ‘volatile isotopes’ as also part of the ‘matter’ of the early Christian family and to include them in its ancient social history⁵⁹.

CONCLUSION

The question of the early Christian family has proven to be a remarkably productive aide de camp in the analytical struggle, under the aegis of asceticism, to render visible and audible the desire of some earliest Christians to become

⁵⁶ See JACOBSON, “Divided Families”, 375.

⁵⁷ See JACOBSON, “Divided Families”, 375.

⁵⁸ For a useful distinction between ‘heterodox’ and ‘heretical’ see W. E. ARNAL, “Doxa, Heresy, and Self-Construction: The Pauline Ekklesiiai and the Boundaries of Urban Identities”, en: E. IERICINSCHI – H. M. ZELLENTIN (eds.), *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen 2008) 50-101, pp. 55-63.

⁵⁹ Cf. JACOBSON, “Divided Families”, 379-380; *Id.*, “Jesus Against the Family”, 201.

someone else than the conventional social subject.⁶⁰ The prompt failure, brief half-life, or statistical insignificance of the alternate families I have described in this article does not mean that they did not exist when they did as they did.

In a recent essay, “Here, There, and Anywhere,” Jonathan Z. Smith discusses as the first of three topographical types of religious activity a mode he terms “domestic religion.” Smith writes:

Considered globally, domestic religion is the most widespread form of religious activity; perhaps due to its very ubiquity, it is also the least studied. This is especially true of domestic religion of the past. Being largely nondramatic in nature and largely oral in transmission, domestic religion does not present itself to us as marked off as “religious” in any forceful manner. ... The domestic realm, “here,” precisely because it is not “there,” because it is not situated in separated sacred space, invites ambiguity as to significance. ... Domestic religion, focused on an extended family, is supremely local. It is concerned with the endurance of the family as a social and biological entity, as a community, as well as with the relations of that community to its wider social and natural environs. While no doubt pressing the matter to an extreme, one thinks of Fustel’s insistence that each family, in classical Greek and Roman tradition, constituted a separate “religion”⁶¹.

From this perspective, the question of the early Christian family must be considered a useful one for Early Christian studies, including the history of asceticism. At the same time, describing the different family histories of earliest Christianity, especially those that came into being through the practice of asceticism, should prove productive for rectifying – a technical term in Smith’s

⁶⁰ For a different kind of social history, that aims to describe both earliest Christianity and other such up-start groups as essentially a standard deviation within the dominant order of the early Roman Empire, the last word has likely not been spoken. Cf. R. MACMULLEN, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge 1966) vi.

⁶¹ See J. Z. SMITH, “Here, There, and Anywhere”, en: *Relating Religion*, 323-339, pp. 325-326.

methodological lexicon – the category of “domestic religion” itself. At least the early Christian family will need to be seen as a much more labile and negotiable experience than it appears to have been thus far.

In the three examples discussed in this article, while all recall and promote a domestic life that is concerned with a “fictive” family “as a community as well as with the relations of that community to its wider social and natural environs,” none of these was obviously “concerned with the endurance of the family as a [conventional] social and biological entity.” For Smith, this might be a sufficient reason to consider them actually an instance of his religion of “anywhere.” Such a designation, while perhaps apt for (some of) those whom the synoptic sayings source (Q) represents and for the apostle Paul, would not be true for the Gospel of Mark or for (some of) the earliest Christians in Corinth, whose asceticism was precisely an attempt to constitute an other home in the very place they already were.