

Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii

A virtual guide to the world of the New Testament



by Peter Oakes
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This learning resource is intended for members of the public and for students interested in early Christianity and the New Testament. It uses the remarkable remains of Roman buildings at Pompeii to reconstruct the social world of early Christian communities. Peter Oakes is Professor of New Testament at the University of Manchester. These materials are based on his extensive research on Pompeii and early Christianity and the publications that have come out of it. Benedict Kent has a PhD in New Testament Studies from the University of Manchester.

Feedback: These materials are available for free download. The one thing we ask is for users to consider providing feedback to help us understand how the resources are being used, how useful they are, and how they could be improved. Please follow the links at the bottom of our homepage to complete our short online questionnaire after using the resource. It's even more valuable to us if you can complete both our 'before' and 'after' questionnaires. If materials have been used as part of a study group, we'd also welcome feedback from group leaders.

Come again: We're also interested in the benefits this material might have for users. If you'd like to return in the future and tell us about any effects the learning has had, we'd love to hear about it. Follow the relevant link at the bottom of our homepage to leave a comment.

Additional resources: For a guide to Pompeii, downloadable maps and many further valuable resources about all the key sites in the region, visit the official Pompeii web-site, <http://pompeiiisites.org/en/>. For house summaries, visit [AD79](#). For extensive photo collections of the houses, visit pompeiiinpictures.com.

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A church in the bar

Worship, reputation and interaction with outsiders

While most Christian groups met in houses, some met in other spaces (Roman governor Pliny even reports some meeting in the open air). When Paul writes to the churches in Corinth about the divisions at the communal meal, at one point he might indicate that the ‘Lord’s supper’ wasn’t actually being eaten in a home:

“What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?” (1 Cor 11:22, 34)

Some congregations might have behaved more like ancient clubs or associations, renting dining rooms in bars and restaurants. These types of spaces can be found all over Pompeii.



The bar in the insula of the Menander (I.10.2-3)

Click to enter the bar next door to the elite house. Interior wall graffiti (no longer easily readable) gives clues as to the kinds of the activities that went on here. Women are mentioned: *Prima domina*, *Capella Bacchis* and *Primigenia*: names associated with prostitution in other graffiti. One piece of graffiti records a slanging match between two men over a bar maid, Iris. Another refers to gambling games. The bar is also merged with a dwelling space (door 3). Inside, customers would have eaten at tables and chairs rather than reclining on the couches seen in the Roman banquet.



What might make a rented space like this a more desirable meeting place than a private house?



Explore more spaces

For a better-preserved bar, go to the [thermopolium of Lucius Vetutius Placidus \(I.8.8\)](#) with its street-facing bar and serving equipment. Go to the bottom of this [AD79 page](#) to see the private outdoors triclinium space next door (I.8.9; also here).

*Character cards

- ▶ Imagine these places lit up at night time. How would your character feel when walking into this kind of space?
- ▶ How might they be perceived by their neighbours? Would they take much notice? (1 Cor 14:16; 14:23)
- ▶ How might the landlords of this establishment treat their Christian customers?



A letter to Christians in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 14:26–33

Worship in Corinth could get quite lively. It was common for Christians, including Paul, to ‘speak in tongues’ – an ecstatic form of communication with God considered to be a heavenly gift. In some accounts, speaking in tongues was confused with being drunk! (Acts 2:12-15).

26 What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. **27** If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. **28** But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. **29** Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. **30** If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. **31** For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. **32** And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, **33** for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.



- ▶ How might the worship described above work in this type of building?
- ▶ What elements would make the space suitable or unsuitable? Discuss how this kind of worship would work in this space, compared with how it would work in the elite house, the small workshop, and the cabinet-maker’s house.



*Character cards

- ▶ What might your character think of worship in this manner?
- ▶ How might they respond to Paul’s instructions?



Explore more spaces

Have a look at diagram of the thermopolium of Sotericus (I.12.3) and identify the rooms in which a group could meet. See also the thermopolium of Asellina (IX.11.2).

Discuss more texts

Click [here](#) to download more discussion activities on what Paul writes next.

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Want to move from ancient to modern worlds?

Download [this activity sheet](#) to explore how different meeting spaces can affect group behaviours and identities—both in the past and in the present

