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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.

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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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Worshipping the god of Israel

in a city of many gods

There were Jewish communities in many of the cities of the Roman empire. Some historians think there may have been a community in Pompeii. The evidence is uncertain. There are no synagogue remains and no mention of such a community by writers of the period. Jewish religion was unusual among the cults of the ancient world for its exclusive devotion to one god. Neglecting the gods of the city could present some issues with the neighbours, especially at times of crisis.



Religion here, there and everywhere

Piety was everywhere in Pompeii: grand civic temples to Apollo and Venus, a long-established temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis, statues and temples to the imperial family that dominated the forum, alters to the *lares compitales* at key crossroads. Honouring these gods was part of public and private life – even meals with friends would involve hymns and prayers, as well as consuming meat from the market place (*macellum*) that was left-over from the sacrifices.



Household gods

In many of the houses you've visited are remains of the shrines (*lararia*) to the *lares familiares* – the protective deities of the properties. Some houses preserve the shrines themselves, others just small wall paintings against which the shrines were placed, and others are simply small niches in the wall. The House of the Menander has a rather fancy shrine (left). The bar in I.10.2–3 has a simple niche and a painting dedicated to the increasingly popular *lares* of Augustus.



Street gods

Lares compitales were honoured at shrines on many of the major crossroads of Pompeii. These gods protected their districts and were popular among the poor and slaves. They attracted associations and were even presented with offerings by the district's magistrates at their festival, the *compitalia*.

“Then the crowds of those initiated into the divine mysteries came pouring in, men and women of every rank and age. They shone with the pure radiance of their linen robes; the women’s hair was anointed and wrapped in a transparent covering, while the men’s heads were completely shaven and their skulls gleamed brightly—earthly stars of the great religion. All together made a shrill ringing sound with their sistrums of bronze and silver, and even gold.”

Apuleius

A letter to the Christians at Corinth: 1 Corinthians 10:14–22

The church at Corinth was likely to have been mostly made up of Gentiles by the time Paul wrote his letter. Some of the Corinthian Christians found it difficult (or undesirable) to give up their old gods for the exclusive worship of a Jewish god. Paul hears that some of them are continuing to attend meals in the local temples and eat meat that had been offered to the gods.

14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. **15** I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. **16** The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? **17** Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. **18** Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? **19** What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? **20** No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. **21** You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. **22** Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?



*Character cards

What consequences might there be for your character if they withdrew from situations in which they would be expected to participate in worship? Would a compromise be possible?

Living with the lares

Family members, slaves and dependants would likely have gathered regularly to offer prayers and incense and even food to the ancestral gods, led by the *pater familias* as their priest.

- ▶ What difficulties could a Christ-group face if they were to cover up the lares or leave them be?
- ▶ How might slaves expect to follow Paul's teaching in a non-Christian household?

Explore [this diagram](#) to see how pervasive street shrines were. Imagine a neighbour's reaction to seeing a Christian householder removing the *lararium* from his wall in full view of the street. Even if a Christ-group had no interaction with the local shrine, they might come under threat from a local crossroads-association if a meeting was seen to be cutting into these worshippers' territory.

Discuss more texts

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

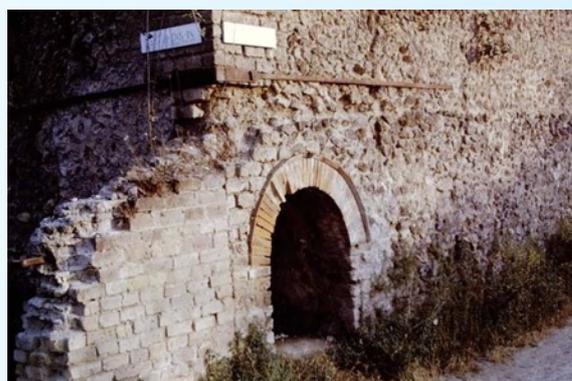


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