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The Family of God: A Christian Tradition as a Greco-Roman Phenomenon

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Introduction

Within the confines of early Christianity, the community of believers was frequently referred to as “the household of God” and the individuals themselves as “children of God.” Scholars have proposed numerous motivations for this tradition, but this paper will offer a previously unexplored possibility: that it emerged from the practice of hospitality and the idea of treating strangers as “family,” which can be found all throughout the ancient world. In short, the relationship of *syngenia* (*συγγένεια*) was foundational to the practice of hospitality. Hosts were obligated to treat strangers/guests as family. This is evident in the familial language utilized in the discussion of hospitality across Greek and Latin sources. Over time, that language and tendency evolved into the “family of God” in early Christian thought and practice. This textual study will draw on anthropological concepts to show that this practice as a Greco-Roman phenomenon can be glimpsed in the earliest Greek and Roman sources.¹ In other words, by establishing hospitality as a form of fictive or artificial kinship, it will also be demonstrated that the practice of hospitality provided the foundations for the language of the Christian community as the household of God, with the believers themselves as his children.² Numerous primary sources will be considered, including: the Greek epics of *The Iliad* and

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¹ Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 15. Arterbury has written one of the most comprehensive studies on hospitality in the ancient world. He points out at the very beginning that Homeric hospitality maintained a prominent sway over social interaction in the Greco-Roman world, though he focuses his study on hospitality as it appears in Luke-Acts.

² In *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Caroline Johnson Hodge makes the argument that
The Odyssey; the works of Plato and Aristotle; the story and commentary of Abraham’s hospitality towards heavenly strangers in Genesis 18, along with other verses from the Hebrew Bible; and the discussion of family and hospitality as it appears in the New Testament. However, before an examination of the primary sources can begin, it is necessary to become familiar with the scholarship regarding the communities of early Christians as the “household of God” and the general conversation surrounding hospitality in early Christianity and the Greco-Roman world.

UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP

Scholars such as David Bossman have pointed out that there exists a wide range of meanings attached to kinship. The branch that will be further analyzed and applied to this work is the anthropological concept of artificial kinship. This refers to social ties that are neither consanguineal (based on blood) nor affinal (established through marriage). Sociologically, this idea is referred to as chosen or voluntary kinship. This understanding of kinship stands in contrast to the kinship found among family members and relatives, or true kin. While the institutions of family, both immediate and extended, create bonds forged by blood and unspoken obligation, fictive kinship often acts as a substitution for real kin. This paper will first demonstrate that hospitality-created relationships, based on voluntary kinship, coalesced outsiders into the household. It will then go on to show that early Christian communities (especially within branches of Pauline Christianity) formed groups founded upon these same ideas of fictive kinship by utilizing familial language to describe both the congregants and the growing congregations.

HOUSEHOLD AND HOSPITALITY: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

Many scholars have dedicated articles and books to the rhetoric surrounding adoption, principally about the distinctions between Christian adoption

“fictive” is not a good term since all relations are social constructions. While I am aware of this and the points made, I will not engage this argument in this work.

3. The Greek and Latin text in this paper comes from the LCL, while the Hebrew was entered by hand, based on entries in the BDB.
5. For a further discussion of artificial kinship, see Hugh Lindsay, *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
6. Abera Mengestu points out that “kinship ties that are not genealogical [i.e., that are not built on the notion of procreation] have been referred to as ‘fictive’, ‘pseudo’, ‘ritual’, ‘artificial’, ‘play’, and ‘as if’ relationships” (Abera M. Mengestu, *God as Father in Paul: Kinship Language and Identity Formation in Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 26).
(governed by theology) and Roman adoption (governed by the law). The discussion surrounding adoption frequently segues into a conversation emphasizing the uniqueness of the Christian community as the “household of God” and Jesus followers as “the children of God.” While I am aware of these studies and the ongoing conversations, it will not be necessary to engage them in the present work. Rather, the phrases οἶκος θεοῦ, τέκνα θεοῦ, and υἱοὶ θεοῦ, which are found throughout the New Testament, will be the concentration.

Up to this point scholars have frequently mentioned in passing that the practice of hospitality has deep roots embedded in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worldviews. In 1983, David C. Verner published a monograph discussing the pastoral epistles couched in their Greco-Roman context. Within his work he provided a brief discussion on οἶκος that is invaluable to this paper: In classical Athens, οἶκος denoted the fundamental social and political unit. The οἶκος was vital to Athenian society for multiple reasons, but was arguably most significant because Athenian wealth depended on household estates. The οἶκος was headed by the male κύριος who held authority over his wife, his children, and his slaves. The Roman family (familia) was simultaneously similar and unique when compared with the Greek household. The households of ancient Judaism were also patriarchal, but Jewish law regarding family contrasted sharply with Greek and Roman law. Despite the differences that existed, individuals were received into the οἶκος through analogous


11. David C. Verner, “The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles,” SBL Dissertation Series 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). While Verner provides a helpful discussion on the household over time and culture (specifically the Haustafeln in the pastoral epistles), a discussion of hospitality—a facet of ancient society that is vital to the conversation—is virtually nonexistent within his work.

12. Aristotle, remarking on this idea in his Politics, pointed out that a complete household consisted of both freemen and slaves (1253b). He goes on to describe the role of κύριος as threefold: as master (δεσπότης), husband (πόσις), and father (πατήρ). It should be noted that familiar relationships within classical Athenian households were surely more complex than Aristotle’s straightforward and simplified explanation.


means: women through marriage, children through birth, and slaves through purchase or pedigree.

In the ancient world, when strangers were received by their hosts, they were assimilated into the household (οἶκος) and cultivated a relationship reminiscent of kinship (συγγένεια, ἔθνη, domus, and familia all reflect a pattern of kinship and framework), undertaking the obligations bestowed on family members at birth, inherited through marriage, and maintained until death. This action of strangers becoming kin through the act of hospitality will be demonstrated, establishing a foundation upon which Christianity would build its community as the οἶκος θεοῦ.

THE GREEK FAMILY AND HOSPITALITY

Familial relationships as explained above, as well as the extension of hospitality to strangers and foreigners, find their beginnings in ancient Greece. According to recent studies surrounding the practice of hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean, guests, regardless of cultural context, would be invited into the house, provided with supplies, and possibly escorted to their next destination. In ancient Greece, the host was expected to tend to the needs of his guests. The ancient Greek term xenia (ξένια), or theoxenia (θεοξένια—when a god sought refuge with a mortal host), expressed this ritualized guest-friendship relationship. Hospitality was so interwoven into ancient Greek society that there existed a general human obligation to the practice. A few examples of this idea can be found particularly in Homer’s Odyssey. Nestor, Menelaus, and Alcinous not only received the basic amenities of food, drink, and lodging, but were also bathed, gifted clothing, offered or provided with transportation to their next destination, and given valuable gifts to take with them. Additionally, in the 5th century BCE, the guest-friendship between the Spartan Archidamus and the Athenian Pericles led the latter to believe that when the Spartans invaded Athenian territory, Archidamus would avoid his estate. Furthermore,

16. “The xenoi were a part of the Greek idea of the family, and fair treatment of (and respect for) their xenoi was among the ‘unwritten commandments’ upon which the ethical standards of the polis were based, ‘that you should honour the gods, your parents and your xenoi.’” W. K. Lacey, The Family in Classical Greece, Aspects of Greek and Roman Life, ed. H.H Scullard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 31. Paul Roth claims that marriage and xenia are parallel social institutions in “The Theme of Corrupted Xenia in Aeschylus’ ‘Oresteia,’” Mnemosyne 46 (1993): 3. He even goes so far as to say that “the basic function of each was to bring an outsider into the kin-group” (Roth, “Corrupted Xenia,” 3). See also John Bell Matthews, “Hospitality and the New Testament Church: An Historical and Exegetical Study” (ThD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964), 127–39.
17. Thucydides 2.13.1; Plutarch, Pericles, 8.4, 33.2.
in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, it become clear that the Greek army could not have accomplished their lengthy march without the hospitality of the various towns who provided them with food, drink, and other necessities. As these examples highlight, the stranger who had a *xenos* in a foreign land had an effective substitute for a kinsman, a protector, a representative, and an ally. He had a refuge if he were forced to flee his home, a storehouse on which to draw when compelled to travel, and a source of men and arms if drawn into battle.

The archaeological evidence which aids us in our reconstruction of classical Greece and customs relating to hospitality in this time is sparse. Most of our knowledge is taken from texts surrounding the epic heroes and events, lauded in songs and legends. However, numerous scholars agree that when patterns are detected across the corpus of a single author or among the writings of numerous contemporary authors, the points of commonality likely reflect historical practices. It is under this assumption that I will proceed with this study. Thus the task of enumerating the many instances in which hospitality is either extended or accepted is a daunting one, and will not be undertaken in this work. However, a few of the most valuable occurrences pertinent to this study demand a brief mention and analysis.

The first is arguably one of the most well-known examples from *The Iliad*. On the field of battle, Glaucus and Diomedes meet in face-to-face combat. In response to Diomedes’s challenge to him, Glaucus says that as a grandson of Bellerophon, he will fight anybody. Upon learning of Glaucus’s ancestry, Diomedes plants his spear in the ground and recounts that his grandfather Oeneus was a close friend of Bellerophon, and declares that the two of them, despite being on opposing sides, are guest-friends (ξένοι). This passage demonstrates the widely accepted view that once this relationship had been established, the guest-friends were linked by a bond similar to that of family. Just like a familial connection, the guest-friendship relationship was passed on to the offspring of the respective individuals.

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18. Ξένος – “guest-friend.”
Yet the most important passage from the Homeric epics in regard to the current discussion is found in The Odyssey. Telemachus comes to Nestor seeking information about his father. Nestor receives him with open arms, offers him lodging, and hosts a feast in his honor. While there is not much to note in the encounter itself, when Telemachus later recounts the experience to his mother, he recalls: “Well now, mother, I’ll recount the truth to you. We went both to Pylos and to Nestor, the shepherd of men. That one received me in his lofty palace and kindly welcomed me. As a father would his own son, newly come from elsewhere after a long time, so that one kindly cared for me with his gloried sons.”

In the above passage we see that, according to Telemachus himself, when Nestor extended hospitality to him, invited him to dine at his table, and attempted to provide him with the information he sought, the young man was treated as one of Nestor’s sons and indirectly accepted into his household. Here the idea of artificial kinship asserts itself. While Telemachus was not family by blood in being received into Nestor’s home and at his table, in every other way he became kin. Indeed, Glotz described hospitality in ancient Greece as “a legal institution; a solemn contract [which] creates between two individuals an artificial kinship and consequently an imprescriptible obligation of mutual protection, hereditary forever.” This concept of artificial kinship extended across cultural and theological divides, eventually seeping into early Christianity. During the Hellenistic period, concepts of kinship, family, and hospitality changed very little. Yet there were some minute deviations, and it is worthwhile to note that ideas of kinship, both legitimate and fictive, extended beyond private parties and entered the political sphere.

26. Gabriel Herman, Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7. It is notable that in early Rome, the patron-client relationship was integrated into the cultural framework and colored social interactions and motivations.
27. Though a thorough discussion of political kinship is not entirely relevant to the work at hand, it is worth pointing out that Christopher P. Jones offers a helpful and enlightening discussion on the topic. In it he distinguishes between traditional kinship and mythical kinship (the idea that individuals share ancestries through gods and heroes of Greek myth). See Christopher P. Jones, Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World, vol. 12 of Revealing Antiquity, ed. G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AS “THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD”

The roots that early Christianity had in Judaism cannot be overlooked, especially in this discussion of household and hospitality. The Greek word οἶκος is related to the Hebrew word בָּהֵית. Yet within the confines of Judaism, instead of Homer marking the epitome of hospitality, the essence of the guest-host relationship was embodied in the figure of Abraham and, in a lesser sense, Lot (see Gen 18:1–8 and 19:1–8, respectively). In Hebrew, the practice is called ḥachnasat orchim, or “welcoming guests” (החננת עְרִיחִים). In addition to the previously mentioned expectations, hosts provided nourishment, comfort, and entertainment for their guests, and at the end of the visit, they would also customarily escort their guests from their homes toward their subsequent destination. At its simplest level, Jews were commanded to extend hospitality to strangers. It was customary to seek hospitality from kinsmen. In Philo, this custom was taken a step further when he commented on the hospitality Abraham extended to the heavenly messengers who had come to announce the pending birth of Isaac. Philo pointed out that the angels perceived Abraham as their kinsman (συγγενής) and, had they not, they would not have sought hospitality from him. While some scholars have suggested that the holy messengers’ perception of Abraham as a kinsman is more of an indication of blessedness and worthiness, I would suggest that the kinship Philo alluded to is yet another example of fictive kinship.

This postulation is not without evidence from the community of Israel as it appears in the Hebrew Bible. Real and fictive kinship relationships provided

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28. In some instances, Israel was portrayed as a household (Amos 5:25; Jer 38:33). In others, it was called the “house of Yahweh” (Num 12:7; Jer 12:7; Hos 8:1; and Mic 4:2); cf. Brendan Byrne, “Sons of Gods,” ABD 6:156–58. Further, in Ephesians 2, Paul emphasizes the inclusiveness of the gospel/church and draws heavily on the kinship language of Old Testament (see more specifically Eph 2:19: ἀρά οὖν ξένοιν καὶ πάροικοι, ἀλλὰ [j] ἐστὶ συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ).

29. While Koenig does not necessarily overlook this point, he does argue that Jewish hospitality arose out of the Bedouin tradition. See John Koenig, “Hospitality,” ABD 3:299–301 (cf. Arterbury, Entertaining Angels, 57n8).


32. Babylonian Talmud Sotah, 46B.


35. Philo writes that the angels also perceived Abraham as “a fellow servant with them, bound to the service of the same master as themselves” (Philo, On Abraham, 116).
the foundation for social organization in ancient Israel. While lineage (also known in Hebrew as אב-בת or “father’s house”) provided identity and inheritance, tribes, which presumed descent from a common ancestor (i.e., Benjamin, Judah, Ephraim, etc.), were not exactly united in blood or marriage and made up another level of the societal hierarchy. Christopher Wright offers an excellent explanation about the pertinence of kinship to the composition of ancient Israelite society and community: “First the family was the basic unit of Israelite kinship and social structure … with important military and judicial functions. Second, it was the basic economic unit of Israel’s land tenure … Third, it was of central importance in the experience and preservation of the covenant relationship with Yahweh.”

Kinship was subsequently extended to outsiders through covenants or legal fictions by which non-kin might be incorporated into the kinship group. The assimilated individuals gained fictive kinship and shared the mutual obligations and privileges of real kinsmen. We glimpsed this same idea of assimilating outsiders in ancient Greece and will see it again with the development of early Christianity.

THE CHRISTIAN “FAMILY”

The typical discussion that surrounds the early Christian community as the “household of God,” in addition to the inevitable conversation regarding “adoption” as children of God, is that the concept of “household” in Christian communities was often referred to as a metaphorical and abstract idea. At

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38. See Judges 5.
40. The familial nature of covenant relations can be glimpsed in Gen 29:14 (NRSV). When Laban encounters Jacob he says, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” In Judg 9:2 (NRSV), Abimelech pressures his mother’s kinsmen to repudiate Jerubbaal as ruler in favor of himself by saying, “Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh.” Cf. Scott W. Hahn, Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library, ed. John J. Collins (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
42. See Rom 8:15–17 for believers as adopted sons, and 1 Pet 4:10 for believers as servants and stewards.
other times the obvious point that gatherings were often held in homes and households is frequently asserted.\textsuperscript{44} While these are valid arguments, they are only facets of the complex spectrum of possibilities.\textsuperscript{45} For just as strangers accepted by hosts were integrated into private households in a Greco-Roman context, outsiders were incorporated into the tribes of ancient Israel through the making of covenants. Similarly, individuals who were embraced into various Christian communities through baptism entered into a communal household and a relationship founded on fictive kinship.\textsuperscript{46} Likewise, as hospitality carried certain reminders of kinship in the Greco-Roman world, parallel responsibilities existed among the Christian believers and their “kin.”\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, this kinship relationship in the New Testament, especially in the language used by Paul, goes beyond the function served in the traditional Greco-Roman household. Instead, over time, it morphed into the “dynamic, versatile, and elastic realm of ‘fictive kinship,’” which provides additional significance and function. Thus, these terms, in a Christian context, are not limited by the confines of a traditional household.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} Acts 2:46, 12:12, 16:40; Rom 16:35; Col 4:15; Phil 1:1–2.

\textsuperscript{45} Mengestu, in \textit{God as Father in Paul}, 204, writes that the image of God as father and followers as children of God “shapes and expresses the self-understanding(s) of early Christ followers, providing an orienting framework to understand who they are, how they came into existence as a community and how they need to relate to God, to one another, and to the outside world.”

\textsuperscript{46} Wolfgang Stegemann, in “The Emergence of God’s New People: The Beginnings of Christianity Reconsiders,” \textit{HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies} 62, no. 1 (2006): 23–40, wrote, “Unlike the many other ancient peoples, the Christianoi as God’s people shared no common genealogical descent from a common ancestor. Instead, they were connected through fictive kinship, which means that they belong to the household of God (\textit{familia dei}) and ultimately traced their birth to and from God” (37).

\textsuperscript{47} For the aforementioned obligations, see Acts 2:42, 44; 4:34; Rom 12:13, 15:26; Gal 6:6; 2 Cor 8:4, 9:13; Phil 1:7, 4:15; 1 Tim 6:18; Heb 13:16.

\textsuperscript{48} For further discussion, see Mengestu, \textit{God as Father in Paul}, 205.
Scholars have evaluated the early Christian community through this anthropological lens. Jerome Neyrey goes so far as to say that when individuals left their natural kinship groups, they were compensated by the fictive kinship of the congregants that formed around Jesus and continued in various forms after his death.49 Dennis Duling supports this idea, arguing that the ekklēsia (ἐκκλησία), specifically in Matthew, should be regarded as a fictive kinship group or brotherhood.50 Gerhard Lenski proposes that early Christian communities developed into social entities most equivalent with the voluntary associations, including ancient hospitality, of the first century Greco-Roman world. By employing these concepts of fictive kinship, it appears that Christian sects attempted to insulate themselves from the pressures of a larger society, identifying an internal cohesion with obvious demarcations of social and moral boundaries.51 In summary, early Christian communities referred to collectively as the “household of God,” and the members of the communities as “children of God,” represented groups of fictive kinship. The same can be demonstrated for relationships built and established through the practice of hospitality in the Greco-Roman world.

CONCLUSION

Within the last decade, Jerome Neyrey has mourned that the issues of “family and fictive kinship remain underdeveloped in [biblical] scholarship.”52 Similarly, Trevor Burke has written, “This neglect not only relates to the gospels but to the Pauline letters as well, which is surprising, given the fact that Paul’s theology was inextricably related to social reality.”53 This paper has, first and foremost, attempted to bring a discussion of fictive kinship to the forefront. Establishments of fictive kinship have been examined and discussed, specifically regarding hospitality, which has foundations in the familial institution. Through this study I have also sought to prove that the community of early Christians as a household entity, and the believers themselves as “children of


God,” developed in part because of the pseudo-familial relationship of hospitality that can be traced back to the Homeric epics. Furthermore, this paper intended to show, as many scholars have before, that early Christianity and its texts cannot be studied in isolation. In order to advance our understanding of early Jesus followers and the religion they professed, the context in which they developed and thrived must always be called upon and considered.