A CULT FROM PHILADELPHIA: OIKOS RELIGION OR CULTIC ASSOCIATION?

Stanley K. Stowers

The inscription SIG 3.985 (= LSA 20) has generated a substantial quantity of comment and discussion.¹ Interpreters have seen tendencies in this supposed foundation of a cultic association that are thought to epitomize religious developments in the Hellenistic age and that warrant comparison with early Christianity. Because the inscription highlights important interpretive issues about the Hellenistic age and early Christianity, it deserves further discussion. My modest goal here is to outline an alternative interpretation of this text. The most recent discussion, an important article by S. C. Barton and G. H. R. Horsley, has highlighted its relevance to early Christianity and the development of Hellenistic religion.² The significance of the inscription was noted by A. D. Nock early in his career and played a role in two of his books.³ It is appropriate with a discussion of this text to salute the enduring contributions of Everett Ferguson, who as a student of Nock’s has continued and deepened his work on early Christianity in its Hellenistic context.

The editions are based upon a marble stele from Philadelphia in Lydia that has been dated to the late second or first century BCE.⁴ The stele records commands given by Zeus in a dream to a certain Dionysius. The commands may have included orders to establish cults to the several gods mentioned on the stele and a series of “moral” instructions. The

---

¹ For bibliography including the history of editions, see Otto Weinreich, Stiftung und Kultsatzungen eines Privatheiligtums in Philadelphia in Lydien (SHAW 16; Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1919); Franciszek Sokolowski, Lois Sacrées de L’ Asie Mineure (Paris: De Boccard, 1955) 20, 53–58, and the following note. I would like to thank Dana Chyung and Emma Wasserman for their invaluable assistance in the research for this article.


⁴ Weinreich, Stiftung, 4.
moral instructions together with the provision that the participants include men and women, slave and free are the features that have drawn so much attention and that have been seen as departures from earlier Greek religion and precursors of Christianity. The issues raised by this text are diverse and complex. I will limit my discussion to aspects of the following issues made prominent by its interpreters. First, is the cult and inscription un-Greek and, if so, in what sense? Robert Parker has described our cult from Philadelphia as "a basically un-Greek cult center." Second, is the cult, as most have concluded, a religious association that had its own temple or cultic site with a membership recruited from the wider society? Third, was the cult egalitarian? Fourth, did the cult aim at the moral elevation of its members and of society? I will argue that the positive answers given to these questions are at best only possible interpretations and at worst misleading and simply false.

I want to begin from a proposal made by L. Michael White and argue that the stele represents an elaboration of a household cult. Rather than being the kind of voluntary organization that sought members from the wider world, the cult primarily served a large and complex household, although friends and relatives of the household living outside may also have played a part. Ample evidence exists for household cults that could become very elaborate and that could be very large. An inscription from the early empire lists five hundred members of a cult, including slaves, that were all members of a particular household to which the cult belonged.

The gods as represented on the stele are more fitting for a household cult than a mystery cult or a private temple. Clearly nothing is more typical of the religion of the Greek oikos in general than Zeus and Hestia. The only other typical place for this pair is in polis cults where

---

5 This interpretation is most fully developed in Barton and Horsley, "Cult Group," but has dominated interpretation from the first editors onward. Sokolowski (LSA, 55), for example, writes, "La tendance universaliste et morale des préceptes dérive d'un esprit oriental plutôt que grec."
8 Ibid., 26–59.
10 Harald Sjöwall, Zeus im altergriechischen Hauskult (Lund: Ohlssons, 1931) 7, 94, 115; Süss, "Hestia," RE 8, 1277-83. Hereinafter I will employ oikos and polis as