

ONCE MORE ABOUT THE ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT *EPISKOPOS*

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Abstract. Reassessing the evidence about the origin of *episkopos* shows that against earlier suggestions the term was not borrowed from Judaism, but it was most likely taken from the Greco-Roman world. *Episkopos* designated officials of the *polis* and of private associations. Early Christian communities were organised and functioned like voluntary associations that in their turn reproduced the structures of the *polis*. The Greco-Roman cultural context also explains some particularities of the qualification lists regarding the *episkopos-presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles.

Keywords: early Christian offices, *episkopos*, *m^ebaqq r, oikos Theou*, private associations, Philippians, Acts, 1 Peter, Pastoral Epistles

New Testament scholarship continues to be divided about the origin and sociocultural background of the terms that designate the offices of the early Christian *ekklisia*, in particular that of *episkopos*. Christian terminology is frequently derived from Judaism, more specifically from the Septuagint and/or from Qumran. Nonetheless, research on the social, political and religious structures of the Greco-Roman world, in particular on private associations suggests that many of these terms were borrowed from the Greco-Roman civic and religious language. The New Testament has provided a specific Christian content, by associating biblical images (like that of the shepherd), or by emphasising the role of the officials in teaching and defending the sound doctrine. Most often, however, the attributions of the New Testament offices remain hazy. The earliest writings attest a plurality of offices with interchangeable designations, whose attributions probably have geographic variations.

In this paper I reassess the evidence concerning the origin of *episkopos* and, against earlier suggestions that the term was borrowed from Judaism, I argue that it was most likely taken from the Greco-Roman world, where it designated officials of the *polis* and of private associations. My underlying assumption is that the early Christian communities were organised and functioned very much like voluntary associations that in their turn reproduced the structures of the *polis*. Further, I point to the cultural context of the qualification lists for *episkopoi-presbyteroi* in the Pastoral Epistles.

1. Possible origins

1.1. The extrabiblical background

In antiquity, *episkopos* has a broad range of meanings. It may refer to the attribution of gods, philosophers, and political bodies, but it also denotes officials