

BOOK REVIEW

Astuhiro Asano, *Community-Identity Construction in Galatians: Exegetical, Social-Anthropological and Socio-Historical Studies* (JSNTSup, 285; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005). x + 272 pp. Hdbk. US\$125.00.

In his début work based upon his doctoral research at the University of Oxford, Astuhiro Asano offers a very creative socio-anthropological approach to establishing a theory of identity construction within the Christian community of Galatia. This work has two distinguishing features. The first is its adoption of anthropological identity theories to account for the social cohesion and emergent identity of the Galatian community. The second is its incorporation of an analogical study comparing the Galatians with a minority religious community in modern Japan (Mukyokai).

The contents are divided into three sections. The first section (Chapters 1–2) lays out the theoretic framework of identity construction theory and applies it to the Mukyokai community. The remaining sections focus upon identity construction in the Galatian community. In particular, the second section (Chapters 3–5) exploits a socio-historical mode of analysis in its attempt to reconstruct the context for identity construction while the third section (Chapters 6–8) combines inter-textual analysis with salvation history in order to examine patterns of identity construction in Galatia.

The model of ethnic identity construction which Asano incorporates is eclectic, borrowing from primordialism, instrumentalism, and transactionalism. From transactionalism, he incorporates the mechanism for identity production. Ethnic identity, on this model, is said to emerge from the behavior of a group at a boundary line where it receives pressure from outside groups (called outgroups). The interaction with these community outsiders causes the group to choose which physio-cultural

features they will maintain and which they will abandon. It is the behavior of a group at this boundary line, in addition to their adherence to a core ethnic sentiment, that causes a distinct identity to emerge.

But where do the other two theories fit in? Instrumentalism and primordialism (reframed as modes within Asano's eclectic theory) are said to be well suited for analyzing the negotiations of different ethnicities. Some groups are more prone to resist change at the boundary line. These groups will be more likely to preserve their core sentiment and physio-cultural features. Since primordialism understands ethnicity in terms of shared (indeed inherent) physio-cultural properties it will provide the best account of communities that endure under the pressures of outgroups. Similarly, there are groups that tend to be more dynamic and fluid in identity negotiations. Therefore, instrumental approaches (which assert that identity is maintained as an instrument to reach economic and political goals) are better adapted for the analysis of these groups since they can easily account for ideological changes, even derogation of the core ethnic sentiment, within a community.

Like Philip Esler, who employs the concept of 'social creativity' in his analysis of Gal. 4.21–5.1 (*Galatians* [NRT; London and New York: Routledge, 1998], pp. 213-14), Asano draws upon the work of Victor Turner. His focus, however, is upon Turner's theory of emergence. On this model, social process is understood as a continual alternation between structure and anti-structure. The oppositions could be organized in columns relative to topic: structural inequality versus anti-structural equality, stability versus transience, complexity versus simplicity, and so forth. Asano is careful to clarify here that these relations should not be conceived of as competing entities which confront one another until one of the two wins out. Instead, he insists that they should be understood as teleological phases in social process.

Once Asano's conceptual equipment is in place, he applies his theory to Mukyokai (Chapter 2). He recounts how the community's worldview was recreated under political and religious pressure (i.e. a variety of outgroups) due to the modernization of Japan. The materiality of religion is seen in the group's preservation of relics which help maintain a sense of communal cohesion.

The next initiative of Asano's project is to establish Paul in the instrumental mode of community-identity construction (Chapter 3). This connection is made primarily because of the way Paul portrays himself in relation to Judaism. The language of Galatians

unquestionably sets Paul outside of the bounds of Judaism (Gal. 1.22-24), painting his former association with the Jews in a negative light. Clearly, Paul's transition is indicative of the fact that his core ethnic sentiment was negotiable.

Chapter 4 contains a very concise and well articulated summary of Gentile inclusion in Judaism in the Second Temple period. Asano points out that Paul's pro-active attitude toward Gentile conversion must have seemed very radical in contrast to the norm of Palestinian Judaism. He also details a variety of rites which Gentiles could perform if they desired to be associated with Judaism. His social-scientific reading of the data leads him to classify these rites as "transactional boundary negotiations" (p. 112).

The fifth chapter is an exegesis of Gal. 2.1-14 which sets up the conflicts between the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch as the context for identity construction in the Galatian community. Although the analysis here is very traditional and does not put forward many innovative interpretations, the conclusions are related to and cast within the framework of Asano's larger social scientific agenda. The marginalization of Gentile believers is explained in terms of non-negotiable physio-cultural features on the part of the Judaizers. To Paul, who approached the Galatians in instrumental mode, this was inconsistent with the freedom from the constraints of a core ethnic sentiment that Christians should enjoy. Paul's response indicates that he perceived his own mode of being as the only legitimate enterprise for Christian community identity.

The application of Turner's theory of social process is picked up in Chapter 6. The focus is upon the concept of liminality where there is a recreation of a world against the backdrop of a structure (in this case Judaism), which results in a temporary or permanent reversal of key values and orders. Therefore, Paul's persuasion in Galatians may be seen as a recreation of the worldview of the mother religion 'Judaism' which challenges her marginalization of Gentiles as second-class citizens on the basis of certain physio-cultural properties (e.g. uncircumcision). The reason the Gentiles are marginalized can be explained in terms of the Jews' commitment to a core ethnic sentiment. Paul, therefore calls this sentiment into question and then reshapes and recreates the Jewish worldview.

Asano argues that this reconstruction can be seen in Gal. 4.21-31. He asserts that though a reactive reading (a response to the circumcisers

based upon the events in Genesis) may be useful in some instances, in this paragraph it would undermine Paul's clear intention to build up the community. This position is supported by offering a critique of three reactive approaches to the passage.

The first approach he takes issue with is represented by Louis Martyn and argues that the introduction of the two covenants is a response to the circumcisers' claim that there was more than one covenant. But Asano rightly criticizes this view for being too dependant upon implications from the remote context and not tied closely enough to the actual wording of the text.

A second reactive approach contends that Paul's mention of Abraham is conditioned by the teaching of his opponents. Paul is not, in fact, concerned with Abraham since he is only mentioned once within the Hagar story. Again, Asano expresses valid concerns regarding this analysis since it seems hard to fathom that Paul would spend two entire chapters addressing Abraham if he had no concern for the subject.

The third argument treats the passage, in part, as a polemic against false teaching on circumcision. Asano's treatment of this interpretation is not as convincing. He claims that the mention of Ishmael with Isaac would have confused matters since both Ishmael and Isaac were circumcised. Why wouldn't Paul's audience be compelled to imitate both, Asano asks. But it seems to misrepresent the issue to insist that merely mimicking Isaac's circumcision is what those who put this argument forward have in mind. Usually it is argued that Paul's opponents had persuaded the Galatians that circumcision was a prerequisite to being counted among the people of God. This was the issue, not imitation of Isaac or Ishmael as Asano suggests. Perhaps this position could have been represented more thoroughly.

After drawing a variety of parallels between Paul and Uchimura, the founder of Mukyokai, Asano offers his reading of the text as a recreation of the Galatian worldview. He emphasizes the anthropological significance of shared ancestry and suggests that Paul employs this concept (by reference to Abraham) in order to bring cohesion and communal identity to an emerging group of marginalized believers in Galatia. The assignment of inauthenticity to the 'present Jerusalem' functions to create a new worldview in which the outgroups are marginalized instead. Individual figures mentioned throughout the text—Abraham, Sarah, Isaac—are treated as examples of status elevation intended to provide a positive identity construction for the Galatian

community. 'Through a recreated worldview, a marginalized community creates and maintains cohesion of the members in the time of adversity' (p. 178). Though creative, this interpretation is open to question on contextual grounds since it does not attempt to place the reading solidly within the rhetorical strategy of the author throughout the discourse. The passage seems to be dealt with in isolation. How, for example, does this perspective deal with the exhortation regarding circumcision just two verses later? If the passage is not a response to false requirements regarding incorporation into the community of God, then why does Paul shift directly to the issue of circumcision after he uses the illustration? Asano's uniquely sociological reading of this text plays a pivotal role in the case he is making, so one would expect detailed investigation at this point. Certainly, a comprehensive analysis would have anticipated this objection by attempting to situate the passage within the larger framework of the discourse.

Chapter 7 treats the baptismal liturgical saying from a liminal perspective. Asano insists that baptism as well as the egalitarian motif should be viewed as an affirmation of (1) a structural convention within a structural community and (2) a recreated worldview in the liminal community. Baptism remains the focus throughout the chapter. It is explained primarily as a phenomena of social process and identity-marking using Turner's pattern of 'preliminal → liminal → postliminal' cast in terms of structure and anti-structure. Specifically, baptism is understood as part of an anti-structural attempt at identity construction against a wider structural context (Judaism). It provided an element of cohesion and independent identity to a newly emerging community in Galatia. For all his talk about identity markers, the function of faith in Christ as a marker of identity is curiously absent. But Asano's social understanding of baptism functioning (in part) to form a coherent egalitarian society within the early church seems to me to be correct.

The final chapter (Chapter 8) is very much in line with the previous chapter in that it posits a second identity marker for the Christian community in Galatia. Asano begins by reestablishing the analogy between the Galatians and Mukyokai. He reiterates how the social cohesion of the Mukyokai community was aided by a collective memory which was memorialized by an artifact (a building, in their case). The letter itself is suggested as the artifact which functions for the Galatians as a religious device to 'preserve and evoke the communal memory, the letter to the Galatians replaced the apostle' (p. 213). Since his presence in the

community provided a physical locus of cohesiveness, the letter written by his hand will now stand in his place, reestablishing and reconstructing the community's shared identity. One piece of evidence he offers for this perspective is Gal. 6.11 where Paul draws attention to the large letters he is using, probably in order to place prominence on the subscript. Asano insists that, besides this obvious literary function of the inscription, Paul uses his autograph as a symbol of his authority and presence.

Asano concludes his study by surveying the evidence and resituating it within the overall goal of the book: the context and practices of identity construction in the Galatian Christian community.

One concern I have is whether this work offers as much insight into the Galatian text and community as it promises. I certainly believe that newer, more innovative methods can and do offer fresh insights into the text and its surroundings, but I am not entirely convinced that much new perspective is brought here. This is not to suggest that a method must produce new results to be of value. The problem is that a lot of specialized interdisciplinary terminology is introduced without a lot of payoff. For example, we have an analysis of the text in part two (Chapter 3) which incorporates Asano's eclectic model for identity construction by portraying Paul in the instrumental mode just to find out that Paul's outsider status in relation to Judaism means that his commitments to the Jewish faith were ultimately negotiable. Similarly, in Chapter 5 we have an abundance of traditional exegesis with traditional conclusions veiled in socio-anthropological terminology. Again, the conclusion here is not novel. Many of Paul's opponents were not so accepting of Gentile incorporation into the body. Part three, focusing on the recreation of worldview, goes a little farther in this regard. I have expressed my concerns with some of the conclusions, but to Asano's credit, some of the analysis in section three does help demonstrate the value of the social sciences for New Testament interpretation—specifically in the kinds of questions it causes the reader to ask of the text. But similar concerns arise here as well. The discussion of baptism, for instance, does not seem to require sociological investigation to discover that it was an expression of Christian identity that replaced circumcision. His insights that it may have provided social cohesion are helpful, but that too is readily available within traditional exegesis of the epistle, although maybe not in those terms.

The book does, however, make several valuable contributions. The chapter on Gentile incorporation in the Second Temple period is especially helpful and counts as a significant addition to the literature on Second Temple Judaism. The analysis also has several positive parallels with John's Elliot's sociological exegesis of 1 Peter which understands many textual phenomena against the background of social themes like communal identity, marginalization, and social estrangement. Although Asano's implementation of social theories is usually more rigorous than Elliot's, several similarities exist. Both works provide good evidence of alienation among their respective communities, a helpful sociological perspective, plenty of insight into the background of their respective epistles, and both works attempt to establish communal identity as an important theme.

Community-Identity Construction in Galatians is an important addition to the literature in the continually emerging field of social scientific exegesis. Though many of its conclusions are not novel, it will be appreciated by scholars concerned with the sociological and historical background of Galatians.

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