The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission

A Scholarly Approach to the Future of Christian Mission

Edited by
ROBERT A. BLINCOE

The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission:
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Introduction

Robert A. Blincoe

"The Hebrew term you are looking for is *hevrah*," Bill Bjoraker said. "Here is a book to get you started." He handed me Israel Goldman's *Life-Long Learning Among Jews*:

> In every Jewish community, from Bible times to the twentieth century, the *hevrah*—a duly constituted society for the promotion of certain specific occupational, charitable, religious, or educational purposes—was the most significant unit of voluntary association. These *havurot* were founded wherever there were Jews.[5]

I learned much from Jewish scholars, for whom the two-structures model is familiar and generally accepted. I especially wanted to answer the question: Were Jewish brotherhoods—whose members pledged themselves to accomplish some good work for God—active in first-century Israel? After listening to Jewish scholars and reading their writings, I believe the answer is yes.

Ralph D. Winter certainly thought so. He theorized that Jews living before and during the New Testament period had developed two distinct structures: the synagogue, where Jews gathered for worship and community life, and a second type of structure, the *hevrah* (plural: *havurot*). *Havurot* and other, less formal, voluntary societies were brotherhoods of Jewish men who committed themselves to one another to accomplish specific sacred obligations. Members of a *hevrah* were, in effect, on a mission to fulfill a particular calling from God.

The most prominent holy brotherhood was the Pharisees.

Pharisees, a Jewish *Hevrah*

The Pharisees were a voluntary association of Jewish men whose members attempted to persuade other Jews to practice the dietary restrictions of the Torah.[6] Requirements for becoming a Pharisee had been formalized for a century by the time Jesus was born:

> The instructions were already laid down in the time of Hillel and Shammai, though these two differ about the details. A candidate for membership was not immediately accepted as a full *haver*, but was subjected to a period of education and probation. The candidate declared his readiness "to accept the obligations of a haver in the presence of three *haverim*" (Bek. 30b). He was first accepted "for wings" (Tosef., Dem. 2:11),

5 Goldman, *Lifelong Learning Among Jews*, 173.

6 Sanders, *Judaism*.

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> according to S. Lieberman, one who washed his hands before eating and before touching ritually clean food (Tosefta ki-Feshutah, pt. 1, 214). In the next stage he undertook more stringent obligations of ritual purity, undertaking "that he would not give *terumah* or *ma'aser* to an *'am ha-aretz* nor prepare ritually clean food for him, and that he would eat ordinary food in a state of ritual purity" (Tosef., ibid., 2:2; Lieberman, ibid., 210; see Dem. 2:3). After undertaking to observe all the obligations of a *haver* he underwent a period of probation—30 days according to Bet Hillel and 12 months according to Bet Shammai—before being accepted as a full *haver*.[7]

I take this opportunity to introduce Dr. Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, Professor of Religion at Wheaton College ("the other Wheaton," he told me, a four-year liberal arts college located in Norton, Massachusetts). In 2002 Brumberg-Kraus wrote a remarkable essay, "Were the Pharisees a Conversionist Sect?" Brumberg-Kraus writes:

> Though early Christian literature represents the Pharisees as perhaps their greatest religious rival—in the conflict stories and other anti-Pharisee polemic in the Gospels, in Paul's dramatic disavowal of his former life as a Pharisee—most have dismissed Matthew's claim, that Pharisees "traversed sea and land to make a single proselyte" (Mt 23:15) as polemical hyperbole.[8]

Brumberg-Kraus, I am glad to say, accepts Matthew's account: the Pharisees were missionaries who actively sought "converts," though, contrary to what most readers assume, the Pharisees were on a mission to convert nominal Jews to live a holy life:

> The terms "proselyte" and "proselytism" usually refer to a conversion from one ethnic community to another. That is, proselytes to Judaism have "converted" from being Gentiles to being members of the Jewish ethnic group. Likewise in Pauline Christianity, one "converts" from being a Gentile or a Jew into a new kind of community in which "there is neither Jew nor Gentile." The Pharisees however seemed to have confined their active efforts to win new followers from among ethnic Jews.[9]

Pharisees would choose from their members a small number who would be sent off to visit the synagogues in a certain region. Perhaps there would be a laying on of hands (*semikhah*)[10] at their commissioning. On the sabbath the traveling band would ask to speak, and if the ruler of the synagogue gave them permission, the visiting Pharisees

7 *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, s.v. *haver*, *haverîm*.

8 Brumberg-Kraus, "Were the Pharisees a Conversionist Sect?" See also Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 6.

9 Brumberg-Kraus, "Were the Pharisees a Conversionist Sect?"

10 Laying on of hands (*semikhah*) at ordination was a Jewish practice that Christians borrowed. The idea that Pharisees laid hands on their traveling bands is conjecture on my part.

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would make an appeal to their fellow Jews to come back to the way of the Lord by following the instructions for table fellowship commanded in the book of Leviticus.[11]

> The Pharisees sought to bring other Jews to conform to their distinctive practices concerning the preparation and conduct of table fellowship. Moreover, conformity to these distinctive practices were the prerequisites for different levels of membership in Pharisaic "associations" (*havurot*). Jews who tithed their food reliably made up the first tier of members (the *ne'emanim* [lit. "reliable" or "faithful ones"]; Jews who both tithed reliably and observed certain purity rules were full-fledged members (*haverim* [lit., "members," "fellows"]).[12]

Of considerable interest to me is Brumberg-Kraus's opinion that Pharisees probably referred to themselves as a *hevrah* (meaning companions bonded together for a common mission); outsiders, perhaps critics, referred to them as Pharisees, "the set apart ones":

> The term "Pharisee" ("separatist") itself does not seem to be the term the Pharisees themselves used primarily to call themselves. Rather, it seems to be the term that others used to distinguish their own identities from that of the Pharisees. Thus, in the Mishnaic traditions that use the term *perushim* ("Pharisees") to refer to the first-century movement that we are talking about, it is put in the mouth of the Sadducees and other opponents of the Pharisees ("We hold it against you, O Pharisees . . . "). Similarly, Paul mentions the term "Pharisee" to stress that he no longer is a Pharisee (Phil 3:5, 8). Likewise, the synoptic Gospels and Acts use the term "Pharisees" for the most part to refer to the opponents of Jesus and Paul. In other words, "Pharisees" was very likely the outsiders' term for the Pharisees, just as "Christianoi" was a name others gave to the disciples of Jesus. *Haverim* and *ne'em'anim* are probably what the Pharisees called themselves and their supporters, *amme ha-aretz* what they called others.[13]

We must ask why the term *hevrah* is not found in the New Testament. Alfred Edersheim, a nineteenth-century Jewish convert to Christianity, explained that "the Pharisees were avowedly a *Chabura* [sic]." If we do not see them explained as such in the New Testament, Edersheim wrote, it is because "the New Testament simply transports us among contemporary scenes and actors, taking the existent state of things, so to speak, for granted."[14] The

11 Blincoe: I wrote Ralph Winter to ask his opinion on Brumberg-Kraus's point of view, that "the Pharisee mission was not to the gentiles; it was a renewal mission to the Jewish nation." Winter replied, "I think I fully agree with the man. Jesus clearly was talking about [in Matt 23:15] making devout persons into proselytes. There is no need, as you say, to say they were going to raw pagans. Who has said they did? I didn't. That is not my point. His words are no problem for me at all. It seems to me that they are very confirming." RDW (personal correspondence of 5/6/05 7:57:59 AM).

12 Brumberg-Kraus, "Were the Pharisees a Conversionist Sect?," 12.

13 Brumberg-Kraus, "Were the Pharisees a Conversionist Sect?," 21.

14 Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, 227.

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idea of the *hevrah* is hidden in plain sight. In my opinion, *hevrah* should be explained in a study Bible, just as other terms that do not appear in the Bible—such as Essenes, Maccabees, Hasmoneans, and Septuagint—are commonly explained in study Bibles.

There were other Jewish holy brotherhoods active in New Testament times. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community referred to itself as a *Yachad*, a "covenant community." Rigid criteria for joining the Qumran community and punishments for members who broke the rules are found in the scrolls. They were not a *hevrah*, yet they were a kind of holy brotherhood. The zealots identified themselves as a holy brotherhood. Thus, not all holy brotherhoods were as formally organized as the Pharisees. Other brotherhoods appeared for a moment and then disbanded: the Therapeutae (a Jewish ascetic community near Alexandria) was a membership society devoted to Scripture, prayer, and holy living. There were holy brotherhoods of Jewish burial societies (*'avurot qaddishot*):

> The burial society performed the most holy of tasks, namely, ministering to the spiritual needs of the dying and attending to the burial of the dead, which is the highest type of love—*hesed shel emet*—inasmuch as the dead cannot return the love shown them.[15]

Perhaps the Word "Structure" Is Too Rigid a Term for Informal Voluntary Societies

Some holy brotherhoods come into being for a short time, their members intending to complete their mission and then disband. We know about the four Jews who took a Nazirite vow (Acts 21:23–24). We hear of Jews who "plotted and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). Not our idea of a holy brotherhood, to be sure, and not a formal *hevrah* like the Pharisees; but a kind of special-interest sodality nonetheless. Richard Horsley has published a history of messianic figures who led popular movements during New Testament times.[16] These rascals and their followers rose suddenly and stayed on the scene only briefly. These groups were not enduring "structures"; they might come into existence for only a short time.

The point is there were two kinds of organizations in Second Temple Israel, the assembly of the entire community for worship in the synagogues (a modality) and voluntary societies whose members carried out a mission which was of interest only to themselves. That is a textbook definition of a sodality. The term "structure" may seem too constraining for voluntary groups whose members organize a small, appropriate mission that will remain binding for only a brief time. Such were the members who joined Paul on his first, second, and third missionary journeys. His missionary bands made a commitment that seemed to last until the end of each journey. Today, a person who wants to organize a formal, enduring, non-profit organization may register with the US government and obtain

15 Goldman, *Lifelong Learning Among Jews*, 173.

16 Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets & Messiahs*.

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a tax identification number and create a website. (I have organized three non-profits in this manner.) But many mission campaigns will be less formal. They will appear suddenly and come to an end when the mission effort achieves, or does not achieve, its goal.

By listening to Jewish scholars, we have identified an idea that is "really there" in the New Testament: two complementary kinds of organizations—synagogues, where the whole community assembled for worship, and holy brotherhoods, which men joined to accomplish particular tasks in God's service. Now that we have a term for Jewish holy brotherhoods, we can propose the idea that Barnabas and Paul formed a kind of *hevrah* on their missionary journeys. They invited Silas, Timothy, Titus and others to join them. Note that when Barnabas and Paul separated, both men invited others to join their missionary bands. Prisca and Aquila probably formed a missionary band in order to establish "churches of the gentiles" (Rom 16:4). This leads us to one of Ralph D. Winter's most important insights:

> The profound missiological implication of all this is that the New Testament is trying to show us *how to borrow effective patterns*; it is trying to free all future missionaries from the need to follow the precise forms of the Jewish synagogue and Jewish missionary band, and yet to allow them to choose comparable indigenous structures in countless new situations across history and around the world.[17]

A great change will take place in our understanding of Christian mission as more readers understand the biblical basis for Ralph D. Winter's two-structure theory. Winter traced his theory to Jewish synagogues and missionary bands that were active in the first century. He wrote:

> I recognize and value both the synagogue (modality) and the Pharisaic missionary band (sodality) in the Jewish community before Christ. Both the New Testament "church" (modality) and the Pauline missionary band (sodality) are reasonable and helpful borrowings of those two earlier structures. The diocese (modality) and the monastery (sodality) are later functional equivalents.[18]

17 Winter, "Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission." See ch. 1 in this volume.

18 Winter, "Protestant Mission Societies." See ch. 3 in this volume.

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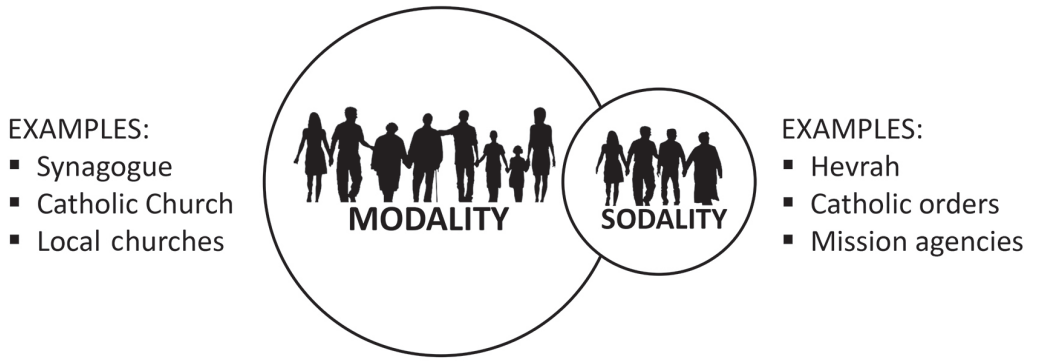


Figure 0.1. Illustration of the sodality-modality model.

Jews continued to organize themselves into *havurot* during the Middle Ages. Israel Goldmann writes:

> There were holy brotherhoods of all kinds, as is indicated by their very names. Thus, to pick almost at random, one might mention the Holy Brotherhood of Tailors, the Holy Brotherhood of Woodchoppers, the Holy Brotherhood for the Study of Torah, the Holy Brotherhood for Dowering the Bride, the Holy Brotherhood for Visiting the Sick and the Holy Brotherhood for Lovingkindness.[19]

The relationship between synagogue and *hevrah* was cordial and non-competitive. No rabbi ever pressed the palms of his hands into his forehead and said, "If only the synagogue were doing its job, we wouldn't need the *hevrah*." Some Jews feel more committed to a *voluntary association* than a synagogue. No one thinks this amiss. Daniel J. Elazar writes:

> It is not simply association with a synagogue that enables a Jew to become part of the organized Jewish community. Affiliation with any of a whole range of organizations, ranging from clearly philanthropic to "secularist" cultural societies, offers the same option.[20]

Elazar adds that the two-structure model is commonplace in the United States "to the point where its articulation within Jewish ranks is usually unnecessary."[21] However, the term *hevrah* has been dropped in favor of another. Most, but not all, Jewish organizations in America apply the terms "association" or "society" to their organizations. The term *hevrah* is still used by Jews who join the *Chevra Hatzalah* (free ambulance services) and *Chevra Kadisha* (Jewish burial societies).

19 Goldman, *Lifelong Learning Among Jews*, 173 (all four paragraphs).

20 Elazar, "Patterns of Jewish Organization," 133.

21 Elazar, "Patterns of Jewish Organization," 130–31.

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Conclusion

I learned a lot by asking Jews to teach me about the holy brotherhoods, the *havurot*. With this background, we may see the story of Jesus and his twelve disciples in a new light. A Jew living in, say, Capernaum who saw twelve men and their teacher arriving in the village of Capernaum would say, "See there, a rabbi with his *hevrah*." Brumberg-Kraus concurs:

> Jesus established a kind of *hevrah* when he chose twelve disciples and began spreading his message, "The kingdom of God is at hand." John the Baptist established a kind of *hevrah* (*yachad*) as well.[22]

When the Holy Spirit sent Paul on his mission, Paul formed a kind of *hevrah* "patterned after the Jewish Pharisees which he knew about earlier as Saul the Pharisee."[23]

But we are hobbled, as were the early Reformers, when one supposes that the church, as we normally think of church, is the sole instrument of God's redemptive mission. We need not wonder what would happen were this idea to be befall the church; we have five hundred years of Protestant mission data to analyze (see ch. 10, "A Protestant Mission Ice Age"). The most important challenge today is validating the biblical basis for the two-structure model, as the apostles apparently did in Galatians 2. The leaders of the church—Peter, James, and John—met with Paul and Barnabas, and agreed that God had established two apostolic administrations of God's redemptive mission, one governing the church where it already existed, the other governed by missionaries. The apostles extended to one another the right hand of fellowship, shaking hands and sealing the deal.

Misgivings expressed by some, that mission agencies, however effective, are a threat to church peace and unity have unfortunately increased the tensions between church leaders and mission agencies. Therefore, it is important to address these suspicions and, if possible, normalize the relationship between church and parachurch. Ralph D. Winter wrote, "Though not often confronted and analyzed structurally, there is an internal strain between church and parachurch organizations which profoundly frustrates the contemporary tasks of renewal and unity as well as mission."[24] Much depends on examining and, we hope, validating Ralph D. Winter's "two structures of God's redemptive mission" model. All manner of "the greater things that you will do" wait for us to begin as we study the major writings collected in this volume. A good relationship between churches and mission societies is not far off, if we apply the lessons that are "really there" in the New Testament and Christian history. Call it *desired symbiosis*: "the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship."[25] That is what this book is all about.

22 Personal correspondence with Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, November 3, 2025.

23 Winter, "Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," ch. 1 in this volume.

24 Winter, "Protestant Mission Societies," see ch. 3 in this volume.

25 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "Symbiosis."

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- What is the author's main point?
- Why does it matter?
- How should we respond?

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