ARTICLE REVIEW

COMMUNITY AND GOSPEL IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY: A RESPONSE TO RICHARD BAUCKHAM'S *GOSPELS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS*

by Philip F. Esler

THE aim of *The Gospels for All Christians*[1] 'is to challenge and refute the current consensus in Gospels scholarship which assumes that each of the Gospels was written for a specific church or group of churches: the so-called Matthean community, Markan community, Lukan community, and Johannine community'. In fact, the contributors argue, 'the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches and so envisaged a very general Christian audience. Their implied readership is not specific but indefinite: any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire (1).

In Chapter One, following a brief introduction, Bauckham develops the general thesis of the book. He first usefully explores the historical factors which have led to what remains a largely unexamined consensus (9–22) and discounts the suggestion that the alleged success of reading strategies based on the consensus sounds in its favour (22–26). He next argues that it is a mistake to read a Gospel in the same way as a letter (which does have a local and particularised reference), since the genre of the Gospels is best seen as a form of biography and we should not expect a *bios* to be crafted to address a small, local community (26–30). Then follows a central feature in the book, the idea that the early Christian movement was not a scattering of isolated, self-sufficient communities with little or no communication among them which he argues character-

[1]Richard Bauckham, ed. *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, and Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998.

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ises the consensus view,[2] but that there was constant and close communication between them and this makes it very unlikely that an evangelist would have written a Gospel only for his own community (30–44). At the end of this section (43–44) he raises the factor of diversity, disagreement and conflict, since he wishes his presentation not to be misunderstood 'as though it portrayed the Christian movement as entirely harmonious and homogeneous'. Finally, he spells out certain hermeneutical implications (44–48).

Bauckham mounts his argument very confidently, but this is the confidence of the recently converted. Although not mentioned in the text, as late as 1993 Bauckham energetically advocated in relation to the Fourth Gospel essentially the same view he now attacks.[3] But every scholar is entitled to change his or her mind, even on issues as important as this.

The other chapters largely develop aspects or implications of Bauckham's case. In Chapter Two Michael B. Thompson offers a real treasure-trove of information on travel in the ancient world, and argues for a close network of communication and transmission of views among first-century Christians (49–70). In Chapter Three Loveday Alexander (who, in fact, wisely keeps her options open rather than aligning herself too closely with Bauckham's position)[4] provides a typically lucid exposition of Christian book production and circulation, noting in particular the Christian use of the bound codex at a time when literary works appeared in scrolls (71–112). In Chapter Four Richard A. Burridge develops his earlier view that the genre of the Gospels is closest to biography by arguing that *bioi* were not written for specific commu-

[2]Yet he only illustrates this charge with respect to one work (31), Andrew Overman's *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

[3]See his article 'The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author', (1993) *JSNT* Volume 49, 21–44, at 30, where he describes as 'gratuitous' and 'highly questionable' the assumption that the Fourth Gospel was 'primarily intended for churches beyond the circle of the Johannine churches'.

[4]Note, for example, her wariness about following Bauckham too far in assuming that the transition from oral transition to written text signals a movement from a local audience to a general one (100) and her suggestion that Johannine material circulated primarily among Johannine networks even if it did have the potential for interaction with adjacent networks (104), or even her plea for what looks very much like the consensus view for Luke (105).

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nities, even though the evangelist might have in mind a category of Christians found in churches across the ancient world (113–145). In Chapter Five Bauckham discusses what the (putative) relationship between Mark and John might look like if his new proposal is correct (147–171). In Chapter Six Stephen C. Barton criticises attempts to relate Gospels to particular communities both as methodologically flawed and as distracting attention away from the theological witness of the text (173–194). In Chapter Seven Francis Watson pursues certain hermeneutical issues (195–217).

Cultural Distance, Group-Orientation and the Gospels

I will begin with an issue which passes largely unnoticed by any of the contributors, namely, the cultural distance between ourselves and the first century members of the Christ-movement. The contributors (and the present writer) all inhabit the modern North Atlantic cultural zone. But if any of us travel to a foreign society we need to become sensitive to the local culture, in which everything we see, hear and experience is contextualised, before we can meaningfully communicate with the locals on any subject other than that of basic subsistence or travel times. The key insight of sociolinguistics is precisely the recognition that discourse has meaning and can only be understood within particular social contexts. All this applies *a fortiori* to attempts to interpret the texts from a foreign culture in the past.

The most appropriate way for biblical commentators to take cultural distance into account is to employ the resources available to us from the social sciences — both in the general area of intercultural awareness and communication and in the specific field Mediterranean anthropology.[5] The detailed familiarity with the ancient data, which is an admirable characteristic particularly of Bauckham but also of the other contributors, will normally not be enough if the data is still viewed within interpretative frameworks derived from North Atlantic

[5]The best starting point (not mentioned by Bauckham and company) remains Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Revised edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.

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ways of understanding the world.[6] It is submitted that a failure to take seriously the question of cultural distance — and the anachronistic and ethnocentric retrojection of modern assumptions onto ancient data which accompanies it — seriously weakens the central thesis of Bauckham's book.

In particular, recent social-scientific research has shown that most cultures in the world, including those of the Mediterranean, are group-oriented, with their members finding personal meaning, value (such as honour) and identity within vital reference groups like the family, while only a few, mainly those in the North Atlantic cultural zone, are individualistic (where people are much more given to finding meaning in life as individuals).[7] The values of individual aspiration and achievement which seem natural to us turn out to be quite unusual in the world at large and in the Mediterranean in particular. This is not to suggest that *individuality* was not a feature of the ancient world, only that *individualism* was not. Characteristic of the Mediterranean world then and now, moreover, was a high level of competitiveness between individuals and groups quite different from our more irenic modes of interrelationship. Paying proper attention to the importance of group-belonging in the ancient Mediterranean renders it more probable than not that an evangelist would have been engaged with his local community, even though such an assumption would always need confirmation against the evidence. By way of analogy, D. C. Parker's meticulous recent study of the text of Codex Bezae shows the extent to which its distinctiveness was so closely tied to the life of one particular community, which on strong grounds he locates in Berytus (modern Beirut).[8] If local pressures could apply so strongly with respect to textform, why not to content?

[6]Thus, while Barton is right to insist (with Edinburgh anthropologist Anthony Cohen) that 'community' is a word requiring careful definition since it is capable of carrying a heavy load of theoretical presuppositions (174–175), this is true of all our major terms, which require social-scientific modelling in view of the cultural distance between us and the New Testament texts, yet such a project is not undertaken by the contributors to this book.

[7]See Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984.

[8]D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

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Aspects of the Community and Gospel Approach

While I am here offering a critique of the Bauckham thesis rather than seeking to defend the existing view, it is necessary to respond to certain aspects of the (frequently caricatured) way in which the contributors present the consensus, in relation to which I will mainly refer to Barton's essay.

First, recent work connecting the Gospels with local communities is sociolinguistic by instinct; it operates on the assumption that the original meanings conveyed by communications (including texts) are related to context and it is therefore essential to do all we can to understand that context. The main point of the exercise is not the recovery of anything 'behind' the text, such as the history of the evangelist's community, but the question of how the evangelists related the Jesus tradition to their local contexts at the time of publication. Barton refers to Raymond Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman) as typifying what the contributors oppose (191), but that work was published in 1979, just as social-scientific ideas were coming into the field, and, in any event, covers a lot more than the history of the Johannine community. Context in the sociolinguistic sense is foreground not background.

Secondly, Barton maintains that the consensus involves a tendency to see the Gospels merely as expressions of group interests, so the text becomes 'little more than the "product" of a hidden substructure of sociological factors and forces' (177), as if there were no evangelist involved at all. As I am one of the commentators tarred with this accusation, I might be permitted to reply that I do not recognise myself in the stereotyping and rhetorical exaggeration involved in the argument. My vision of Luke is that of an evangelist heavily concerned with the life of his community (or communities), certainly interested in explaining and justifying a particular interpretation of Gospel traditions to them, but also quite capable of strong criticism, such as in relation to the elite members for their treatment of the poor.[9] The idea that the evangelists were creative thinkers developing a distinctive

[9]Philip. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 164–200.

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theology became popular with the redaction critics like Bornkamm and Conzelmann as long ago as the 1950s, after all, and can hardly be regarded as antithetical to the consensus view. All the consensus requires is the socially realistic scenario — in a group-oriented society — of an evangelist closely linked with his local congregation and making sure his vision of the Gospel is related to their situation, whether to legitimate or to criticise.

Bauckham and company raise the possibility of evangelists travelling from place to place and not necessarily reflecting any particular community's view. While the idea of their travelling is possible, although not proven, I consider the consequences they draw from it to derive from modern individualism. In view of the group-orientation of this culture, it is more socially realistic to imagine such a travelling evangelist as representing the views of the congregation with which he was most closely related than to think he was a largely independent, free agent. After all, even someone as widely travelled as Paul had certain views on the nature of Christian community, for example, that where Israelites and gentiles were members of a congregation they should be in table-fellowship with each other, to which he would have adhered wherever he went. Paul could have written Mark 7.24–30, but not Matt. 15.21–28, passages discussed below. None of this is to deny the undoubted creativity of the evangelists, merely to insist upon the social contexts in which it was exercised.

At the same time, Luke-Acts probably provides us with more evidence to explore relationships between community and Gospel than is the case with the other Gospels. I agree that the nature of the evidence requires due caution in reaching views about such relationships and that different critics will reach different views. But difference of opinion is inevitable in historical research where we can only ever weigh probabilities and I am puzzled by the fact that Barton considers the failure of critics to reach agreement on these matters problematic (180–181).

The Significance of Diverse Gospels

Bauckham proposes a very revealing 'preliminary argument' in order 'to sow the initial seed of possibility' (12). On the

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assumption of Marcan priority, Bauckham suggests that when Matthew and Luke got hold of Mark's Gospel, they must have realised that it had circulated quite widely among Christian congregations and was being read in the churches to which they respectively belonged. Accordingly, they would have envisaged an audience for their Gospels as least as broad as Mark had already achieved. 'Most likely Matthew and Luke each expected his own Gospel to replace Mark's.' If so, it is improbable that each would have addressed his Gospel to the more restricted audience of his own community (12–13).

The problem with this view is that Bauckham pays insufficient attention to what flows from Matthew and Luke having significantly altered, radically amplified and even, in Luke's case, considerably abridged Mark. As far as they were concerned, in many respects Mark had got it wrong, or he had not said or at least stressed things which needed saying or stressing, or he had included material best excluded. What they would have learned from the arrival of Mark in their congregations was not just the prospect that their Gospels might circulate as widely as Mark's, or that *their* Gospels would replace *Mark's*, but rather that *anything they wrote* was just as likely to be savaged in congregations it finally reached as Mark had been when it fell into their hands. In other words, what they had done to Mark would have alerted them to the *futility of attempting to reach a general audience.*

Bauckham has sought to cover his flanks against this type of objection by acknowledging the possibility of a conflict in the movement (43) and even of a competitive relationship among evangelists (47).[10] The problem with these concessions is that they pull the rug out from under his vision of the audience: 'any and every Christian community' of the period (1). If there was such conflict and diversity and other evangelists knew from what happened to Mark that their Gospels were likely to be plundered in new contexts, in what meaningful sense could they imagine they were writing to 'all Christians' or expect to have an impact on anything other than a small

[10]But that the notion of friendly relations (characteristic of our modern era) is probably more congenial to him can be seen in his views on how John and Mark are related (see below).

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number of churches who happened not to find their views unacceptable? In short, 'all Christians', the lynchpin of Bauckham's case, just did not exist as a category of persons capable of being addressed in this period. What existed was a network of cells, possibly in communication but if so probably troubled with division, which simply did not provide a basis for such a general communicative aim.

Three Models for Gospel Audiences

It is a striking feature of the way that Bauckham has formulated his thesis that he only allows of two possibilities for the Gospels, either they were written for specific communities of a distinctive type, 'purely for home consumption' (43), or 'that an evangelist writing a Gospel expected his work to circulate widely among the churches, had no particular Christian audience in view, but envisaged as his audience any church (or any church in which Greek was understood) to which his work might find its way' (11). Yet Bauckham has failed to envisage a third hypothesis. This is that each evangelist primarily shaped his Gospel in accordance with the faith and understanding of his local community (a process rendered *prima facie* likely by the extent to which ancient Mediterranean persons were embedded in groups), but also contemplated the possibility that it would travel further afield, in which case he hoped that his version would compete with and even supplant the unsatisfactory Gospels of others. The process is akin to colonisation; one group thinks it has the truth and it is important to get other Christian groups to adopt it. I concede that I have not developed this idea before, but then nor did I argue in my previous work on Luke-Acts that the Lucan community (or ensemble of communities of a similar type) had little or no contact with other parts of the Christian movement, which is a view Bauckham wrongly attributes to all 'consensus' critics. I happily acknowledge that I might not have given much thought to this possibility without the stimulus of Bauckham's book.

On this third possibility we are able to appropriate *in toto* the sterling work done by Bauckham and Thompson in dem-

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onstrating the existence of numerous lines of communication among early Christian groups in the first century! But now the nature of these links can be seen in a socially realistic light — as the means for colonising communities further afield with the local way of understanding Jesus and the Gospel. The number of times the New Testament reports trouble being caused in local communities by messengers or letters arriving from afar with this general aim strongly corroborates this possibility (Acts 15.1; Gal. 2.11; 3.1; 2 Cor. 3.1–2; 7.8; 10.9).

Biography and Gospel

Part of the Bauckham thesis, amplified by Burridge, is that biography is a genre unsuited to reflect community concerns. I will use one example from a huge range of possibilities to counter this idea.

In Mark 7.24–30, after a discussion of clean and unclean food (7.14–23), Jesus travels to the region of Tyre and enters a house there, in due course casting out the demon from the daughter of a gentile woman who comes to him. Yet Matthew radically alters Mark. His Jesus does not enter a house and the woman comes up to him in the open air (Matt. 15.21–28). Moreover, Matthew removes the image in Mark 7.28 of the children (= Israelites) and dogs (= gentiles) eating the same food (15.27).[11] It is difficult to see how such alterations by Matthew could not have some connection with his local community, whether he was attacking his community's practice of mixed table-fellowship, or seeking to confirm their opposition to it. Either way, we see how effortlessly what is allegedly a *bios* can be shaped in community-oriented ways.

In addition to this, however, Burridge seeks to develop his views of biography as the Gospels' genre in ways that are socially unrealistic and unconvincing. On the basis of similarities between Graeco-Roman biographies such as the *Agricola* of Tacitus or the *Lives* of Suetonius and Plutarch, and the Gospels, he proceeds to argue a case for a pronounced similarity between the *audiences* of each. Since the Graeco-Roman biographies were addressed quite widely, so too were the Gospels.

[11]See the discussion in Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 89–93.

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Since we do not need to suppose a 'Tacitean' or a Cato community for the Greek and Roman *bioi*, neither do we need to suppose communities for the Gospels (134–144).

This argument is flimsy, to say the least. The Graeco-Roman authors he mentions were members of the social elite. Their primary reference group was the upper level of Greek or Roman society. Most of them, like Plutarch and Tacitus, were heavily establishment figures. When they wrote they no doubt had in mind reaching wide stretches of this primary reference group or at least particular sections within it. Their position was, in short, utterly different from that of the small groups of people who acknowledged a human being known as Jesus Christ as their saviour and who had faced the possibility of serious persecution since the time of Nero at least. Anyone writing for people like this would inevitably be affected by the extent to which they were alienated from surrounding culture as much as part of it. They would primarily write for their reference group, the communities of which they were members.

That we should be very hesitant about postulating too close a connection between the *bioi* and the Gospels is also suggested by the fundamental difference in book production between the two set out by Loveday Alexander in this very volume, the significance of which is missed by Burridge (and Barton) — the *bioi* were written in scrolls, while early Christian literature was written in the much more down-market form of the codex.

Relating Mark and John: Competitors or Complements?

Bauckham uses a relationship he proposes between Mark and John as further evidence of his thesis. First, he suggests that John, writing for all Christians, could have assumed most of his listeners/readers would have known Mark. Yet Bauckham cannot go along with the possibility that John saw his predecessor as a competitor (159). John's aim was to complement Mark (170). Bauckham argues that in two of his parenthetical explanations (3.24 and 11.2) John has actually helped his listeners/readers correlate his Gospel (in this friendly way) to Mark's.

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Thus Bauckham finds John 3.24 ('For John had not yet been put in prison') only explicable on the basis that his audience knew Mark 1.14 and that John wants them to place the events of John 1.19–4.43 between Mark 1.13 and 1.14 (154). He notes, but rejects, an earlier suggestion that John is here correcting Mark to demonstrate that John and Jesus had a period when they were both active in ministry, since 'the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee' does not begin until John 4.43–45 (154). This is unpersuasive. Baptism *by* Jesus (John 3.22; 4.1) could only have been conducted in public. John is unique among the evangelists in depicting Jesus as a baptiser (although Bauckham does not mention this).[12] If John thought his readers knew Mark, he also wanted them to know his predecessor was inadequate in not mentioning two vital points: (a) that *Jesus* had a career as a baptiser, and (b) such a career began before Mark says Jesus became publicly active. John is correcting, not complementing, Mark. If one asks why John made this correction or — if Bauckham is wrong in assuming knowledge of Mark — he simply included this feature, it seems to me that the likely answer must involve its relation to the author's primary reference group, the community in which he lived, even if he would have been quite happy for wider circulation of his Gospel to win over readers further afield to his novel position.

Bauckham argues that at numerous points John intends that his readers/listeners will fill in elisions in his account with what they know from Mark (156–159). The argument seems too dependent on close scrutiny of the *texts* to be plausible in relation to an ancient, mainly illiterate, audience. Moreover, if John was not seeking to compete with Mark but merely to complement him, why does he bother *at all* to provide his own distinctive versions of passages in Mark, such as the feeding of the five thousand (John 6.1–15; Mark 6.32–44), the walking on water (John 6.16–21; Mark 6.45–52), the anointing at Bethany (John 12.1–11; Mark 14.3–9) or, for that matter, the Passion itself (John 18–19; Mark 14–15)? Here are clear cases where John rejected Mark's account.

[12]Oddly enough, the Gospel records at 4.2 (a later gloss?) that it was not Jesus but his disciples who did the baptising, yet even this would constitute a public ministry contemporaneous with that of John the Baptist unique to the Fourth Gospel.

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It is also very surprising that Bauckham should seize on John 11.2 as linking the two Gospels in a 'complementary' way (161–165; 170), given that, among other alterations, John relocates the anointing at Bethany from the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14.3) to that of Lazarus and his sisters (although Bauckham never mentions this major variation). John 11.2 signals the fact that the evangelist is about to rework Mark (or any other source for this tradition) very dramatically (as, in fact, he does in Chapter 12).

Secondly, Bauckham argues that John's characterisation is inconsistent with his writing for the evangelist's own community, since specifically Johannine characters (such as Nicodemus, Lazarus, Annas and the beloved disciple) are introduced in a manner which presupposes no previous knowledge of them, which would be odd if John were writing for his local community who could be expected to know them, while characters who would already be known from Mark receive no such treatment (165–166).

While much more could be said, two considerations seem to me positively to falsify Bauckham's hypothesis in this area. First, Nathanael is a distinctively Johannine character who is not given any special introduction (John 1.45). Secondly, and more seriously, are we really to believe it more probable that John was writing for 'all Christians' rather than his own community when he refers to an important character by nothing more than the enigmatic designation of 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (13.23; 19.26; 20.2; 21.20). We have here a sense of happenings and knowledge off stage — but among the evangelist's congregation, not among 'all Christians'. As recently as 1993, indeed, Bauckham himself adhered to the far more natural view that the identity of the beloved disciple was known within the Johannine churches but not further afield.[13]

The possible relationship between Mark and John seems to me to support either the first or third models of Gospel audiences set out above, not Bauckham's 'all Christians' model.

Finally, Bauckham strongly resists the notion that communities for whom the evangelists wrote were introverted

[13]Bauckham, 'The Beloved Disciple', 30.

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(43). In my view, expressed elsewhere,[14] the audience for the Fourth Gospel at least was deeply introverted. I would add to my published arguments that such introversion is also strongly suggested by a sociolinguistic analysis of the unique 'ingroup' language of Jesus' discourses, which is something Bauckham does not mention, but there is no space here to develop this area.

Hermeneutics

Francis Watson's essay is built on the assertion that the consensus view (of which he discusses only one example — published in 1956!)[15] claims 'the Gospels speak primarily of the Christian community and not of Jesus himself' (197). This means that consensus Gospel interpretations are 'allegorical' in speaking about something other than the 'literal' referent of the Gospels — Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, they also deny the Incarnation in losing the 'bodiliness' of Jesus (215). Watson presents himself, in effect, as a latter day Erasmus or Reformer — saving the literal sense of scripture, the Christian truth-claim and even the Incarnation itself from the clutches of the allegorisers.

His argument is unpersuasive. For consensus critics to be interested in how the four evangelists interpreted traditions about Jesus for the benefit of their local communities does not involve an insouciance to the historical or theological reality of Jesus underlying the Gospels; many of them are keenly interested in those subjects. But such interest certainly does inculcate a healthy sense of the contextualised nature of the literary sources we have for Jesus. What we learn about Jesus in the Gospels is mediated to us through the mind of the evangelists and whatever experiences shaped their perspective, in a heavily group-oriented culture and long ago. This also applies on the 'all Christians' argument, since Bauckham himself concedes that there is a context for the Gospels, namely, 'the early Christian movement in the first century' (46). Even if address-

[14]Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation.* London and New York: Routledge, 70–91.

[15]Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

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ing a general audience, the evangelists, writing late in the first century, could not just step out of the particularities of their setting or their experience, often troubled, in the period of history between the time of Jesus and themselves, the early recognition of which is crystal clear in Mark 13. In short, the 'literal' sense of which Watson speaks is an illusion. It is equivalent to 'my — Francis Watson's — sense' of what is important concerning Jesus. In advocating a 'literal' understanding of Jesus free of community influence, which really means his understanding of a body of material about Jesus abstracted from the diversity of the Gospels, Watson is inviting us to accept a fifth Gospel, his own of course, which even claims proprietorial rights over the Incarnation.

Conclusion

Bauckham's arguments and those of the other contributors compel us to give this whole issue the attention it deserves. While their primary assertion fails to convince, they have forced those of us who wish to relate Gospels to local communities to be more sensitive to the issues thrown up if the Gospels travelled around the early communities of Christ-followers in anything like the manner they postulate. At the same time, however, this book illustrates the risks attendant on biblical exegesis and hermeneutics which do not take seriously the need for a reasonable use of social-scientific perspectives in penetrating the complex links between text and context, community and Gospel.

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