

THE GOSPELS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS?
A RESPONSE TO RICHARD BAUCKHAM

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Introduction

The year 1998 saw the publication of an important collection of essays, edited by Richard Bauckham, which proposed a radical view of the intentions of the Gospel writers and the identity of their intended readers. The four canonical Gospels were written not for local Christian groups, as most scholars contend, but for a very broad Christian readership; they were intended in fact to be circulated to all churches and to be read by all Christians.¹ According to this hypothesis, scholars have simply been wrong in postulating the existence of the four specific Christian communities in which and for which the Gospels were written. The Matthaean community, the Markan community, the Lukan community and the Johannine community are in fact nothing more than scholarly constructs that have never been evidenced to any satisfactory degree. This in turn means that the common scholarly practice of reconstructing these communities from the Gospels themselves is misguided to say the least. It should be clear even from this brief descrip-

1. R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998). It is interesting to note that this view has been recently (and independently) proposed by M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 2000), pp. 106-15.

tion of its contents that this volume has the potential to alter drastically our understanding of the Gospels and the manner in which we interpret them.

The impact of this collection of essays in the short time since its publication has been quite significant. A number of early reviewers have sung its praises,² and its influence is evident in other quarters as well.³ In the light of this initial and growing acceptance, it is permissible to ask whether such support is justified. Is this alternative view of the Gospels and their intended readers as convincing as its proponents and supporters contend? Does the evidence suggest that we should dispense with the four Gospel communities that have so dominated Gospel scholarship over the past few decades? In my opinion this challenge to the consensus view, despite its rapid acceptance in some quarters, is not convincing.⁴ While it contains some valid criticisms of traditional Gospel scholarship, it does not in the final analysis succeed in proving it wrong. Nor does it make a plausible alternative case that the Gospels were composed for each and every Christian church. The purpose of this study is to scrutinise all aspects of this new proposal, both the evidence in favour of its view that the Gospels were written for all

2. See, for example, the reviews by P. Ellingworth in *EvQ* 71 (1999), pp. 273-75 and B.E. Bowe in *CTM* 27 (2000), p. 295. One can add to these the words of high praise by those scholars who appear on the back cover of this book, D.A. Carson, J. Goldingay and P. Stuhlmacher.

3. One example will suffice to demonstrate this point. In the same year the Bauckham volume appeared, I published a detailed study of the Matthean community; see D.C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998). In the subsequent reviews of this book, no less than three reviewers (thus far) independently referred to the Bauckham volume, and each of them made the point that my work had been compromised to some extent by the arguments presented in this particular book; see the reviews of R. Beaton in *JTS* 51 (2000), pp. 242-46; J. Carelton Paget in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (2000-2001), pp. 48-51, and M. Goodacre in *HeyJ* 41 (2000), pp. 334-36.

4. Other scholars have come to this conclusion as well; see the critical evaluation by P.F. Esler, 'Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham's *Gospels for All Christians*', *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 235-48. In the pages following this critique, Bauckham offers a short reply; see R. Bauckham, 'Response to Philip Esler', *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 248-53. For another early critique of this volume, see J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 25-28.

Christians and its arguments against the standard position that the Gospels were written for local Christian communities.

The Alternative Hypothesis of Richard Bauckham

Without doubt the most important contribution in this volume is the first essay, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?', by Richard Bauckham himself.⁵ It is this offering that presents the most sustained attack on the consensus position and the most detailed account of the alternative hypothesis.⁶ The other contributions are more specific and often treat in greater detail some of the points raised by Bauckham. I want now to summarise briefly the major arguments presented by Bauckham in his essay.

Bauckham begins by accepting the common view that the four Gospels were written for Christians, not for non-Christians, but he contends that they were designed for any and every Christian community to which they may have circulated (pp. 10-11). As a preliminary point in favour of his hypothesis, Bauckham refers to the relationships between the synoptic Gospels. If Matthew and Luke used Mark, it follows that Mark had circulated widely prior to its incorporation in these later Gospels. For Bauckham this has a significant bearing on the intentions of both Matthew and Luke. Since both Evangelists knew that Mark had circulated broadly in Christian circles, it seems rather improbable that they wrote their own Gospels merely for their own local communities (pp. 12-13).

Having made this initial observation, Bauckham presents a survey of both earlier and more recent Gospel studies that reveals how the consensus view on the Gospel communities has been merely assumed and never substantiated by detailed analysis. He apportions much of the blame for the view that the Gospels were written for local communities to the work of B.H. Streeter in 1924, who suggested that the four Gospels originated in different centres of the Christian movement (pp. 14-15). Bauckham then documents how later scholars, following this lead,

5. R. Bauckham, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 9-49.

6. This point is conceded by one of the contributors to the volume: F. Watson, who wrote the final essay, contends that 'In my view, Bauckham's attack on the consensus...is entirely successful'; see F. Watson, 'Toward a Literal Reading of the Gospels', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 195-217 (195).

tended to confuse the communities in which the Gospels were written with the intended readers of the Gospels. This led them to offer reconstructions of the Gospel communities from the texts of the Gospels themselves (pp. 15-19). One of the major characteristics of this research is that the Gospels, supposedly about Jesus, have been read as allegories of the four Gospel communities (pp. 19-20).⁷ Bauckham highlights the different scholarly reconstructions of these Gospel communities and maintains that such diversity in their conclusions casts substantial doubt on the whole enterprise (p. 20).⁸

Bauckham then raises a possible objection. Even if scholars have not evidenced the existence of the Gospel communities, are not the assumptions about the existence of these particular churches confirmed by the results of their studies? Bauckham does not agree. Very little in the Gospels (if anything) can be seen to be applicable to a single Christian community. Whatever affected the Matthaean or Johannine communities, on the consensus view, must have affected other Christian groups as well (pp. 22-24). Bauckham presents a further objection to his line of argument. Even if it is accepted that the situations presupposed in the Gospels were relevant to other Christian groups, they would not have been applicable to all Christian churches. In response Bauckham contends that the Evangelists did not expect that every aspect of their particular Gospel would be equally relevant to each reader who encountered it. They each focused on issues that were of widespread interest to Christians, but they believed that their writings would still have been of interest to churches in which these features were lacking (pp. 24-25).

The heart of Bauckham's essay comprises his arguments in favour of his own position. His opening point is that Gospel scholars have tended to read these documents as though they were Pauline letters. Since the epistles were directed to local churches and address local issues, scholars have assumed that the Gospels must have had the same purpose. But Bauckham insists that this is invalid. By their very genre, letters address specific people and their particular circumstances. But the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient Graeco-Roman biography

7. The same point is made in detail by Watson, 'Toward a Literal Reading of the Gospels', *passim*.

8. A similar reservation is expressed by another contributor, S.C. Barton, 'Can we Identify the Gospel Audiences?', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 173-94.

(*bios*), and such texts were more likely to presume a broad rather than a restricted readership (pp. 27-28).⁹ Moreover, Paul was forced to write his letters because he was distant from his churches. When he was present in these communities, he communicated orally with their members. This point has a considerable impact on the way in which we should identify the intended readers of the Gospels. Why would the Evangelists, if they lived in the community for which they wrote their Gospels, bother to write at all when they could simply speak to their fellow church members and impart their particular message? The very purpose of writing, for Bauckham, was to communicate with readers over great distances. Books were designed to circulate widely and be read by people completely unknown to the author (pp. 28-30).¹⁰

The next step in Bauckham's argument concerns the nature of the early Christian movement. This movement was not, as some Gospel scholars suggest, a collection of isolated and independent churches; on the contrary, it was a network of groups that kept in close communication with one another (pp. 30-32).¹¹ Furthermore, the early Christian movement saw itself as a worldwide movement (p. 33), and most of the Christian leaders in the first generation moved from place to place (pp. 33-35). The mobility of prominent Christians was also a feature of the church in later centuries (pp. 36-37). This evidence suggests that the Evangelists probably moved from church to church, and wrote with a more universal outlook than the consensus claims (pp. 36, 37-38). As further evidence of the worldwide outlook of the Christian movement, Bauckham cites the fact that the churches sent letters to one another in the first and second centuries (pp. 38-39). These close contacts between the churches are also confirmed by the evidence of Papias, Ignatius of Antioch and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (pp. 38-43), and by the diversity and conflict in the Christian movement. Those who supported one

9. R.A. Burridge makes the same point in far greater detail in his contribution to this volume; see R.A. Burridge, 'About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 113-45.

10. See the comprehensive discussion of ancient book production by L. Alexander, 'Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 71-105.

11. A similar point is made by Hengel, *Four Gospels*, p. 108. For a detailed discussion of the mobility within the Christian movement, see the contribution of M.B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, pp. 49-70.

version of the Christian message did not keep to their local area, but moved from place to place hoping to convince other Christians that their particular interpretation was correct (p. 43).

Bauckham concludes with some hermeneutical observations. First, the so-called Gospel communities have no real bearing on interpreting the Gospels. It is in fact impermissible to speak of the Matthaean community, the Markan community and so on (pp. 44-45). Secondly, Bauckham makes the point that his challenge to the consensus is not merely designed to broaden the intended readers of the Gospels from a local church to a wider group of churches. He reaffirms his basic point that the Evangelists composed their works for any and every church that came into contact with their texts. Thirdly, his thesis does not suggest that the Gospels must be seen outside any historical context. It simply means that the context is the late first-century Christian movement in general and not the Evangelist's particular community (p. 46). A fourth point is that this understanding of the purpose of the Gospels coheres with the manner in which these texts have always been read. Readers of Paul's letters from all periods of history have understood the hermeneutical relevance of the particular Pauline churches for evaluating these letters, but no one prior to the scholars of the twentieth century thought that the interpretation of Matthew (for example) depended upon a prior understanding of the Matthaean community (p. 47).

Fifthly, Bauckham's position does not demand that we underestimate the diversity of the Gospels. The Gospels are clearly different, with divergent portraits of Jesus, and they provide a range of views on Christian self-identity. But this does not entail that they were written for particular Christian groups. It simply means that the Evangelists wished to present their distinctive theological and christological views to those Christians who came into contact with their texts (pp. 47-48). Finally, Bauckham highlights that the consensus view has been fuelled by a 'misplaced desire for historical specificity'. Scholars have read the Gospels as 'closed texts' whose meaning is crystal clear to the implied reader, but the Gospels are in fact 'open texts' that have a more indeterminate readership and, as a result, 'leave their meaning more open to their real readers' participation in producing meaning' (p. 48).

The Gospels for All Christians?

I want now to evaluate Bauckham's alternative hypothesis that the Gospels were composed for all Christians. One preliminary point that requires mention at the outset is that all of his evidence is circumstantial in nature. His case is built upon certain claims about the nature of the Christian movement and some general observations about the Gospels. Not one argument is based upon the internal evidence of the Gospels themselves. In fact, in the presentation of his thesis, Bauckham hardly cites any Gospel passages.¹² This approach to the whole issue stands in stark contrast to those scholars criticised by Bauckham, whose views concerning the Gospel communities are largely based upon the Gospel texts. We shall return to this significant point later.

Two of Bauckham's arguments concern the nature of the early Christian movement. These general considerations do not in any way demonstrate that the Gospels were written for all Christians, but they are intended to establish a plausible background to this hypothesis. The first of these comes to the fore in his initial assumption, which he shares with most other scholars, that the Gospels were intended for Christians and not for non-Christians.¹³ This means in effect that the Gospels were consciously written only for believers in Christ and not for those who were not believers. Underlying this contention is the implicit assumption that all four Evangelists classified the world into two groups, Christians and non-Christians. Bauckham says as much in stating 'that the early Christian movement had a strong sense of itself as a worldwide movement' (p. 33), and he defends this statement by appeal to a number of texts (1 Cor. 1.2; 9.5; 16.3; 1 Thess. 2.14; 1 Pet. 5.9; Rev. 7.9-14). It is questionable, however, whether these sorts of general statements constitute satisfactory evidence from which to draw

12. I am indebted for this point to my colleague, Dr James McLaren, who read an earlier draft of this study.

13. This assumption on the part of Bauckham is itself surprising in an essay that challenges unsubstantiated assumptions. It is also difficult to comprehend, given that most scholars make this assumption on the grounds that the Gospels were written for local Christian communities. Since Bauckham does not share this view, it is not clear why he restricts the intended readers of the Gospels only to the Christian world. It is significant that S.C. Barton, one of Bauckham's co-writers, contends that the Gospels may have been written for both Christians and non-Christians. See Barton, 'Can we Identify the Gospel Audiences?', p. 194.

such a concrete historical conclusion concerning the manner in which the early Christians interpreted themselves. In order to substantiate his point, Bauckham needs to demonstrate from the history of the Christian movement that its members identified themselves and other Christians as participants in a single and unified movement. The evidence we possess, however, lends little support.

It is well known that in the initial decades the early Christians were divided into at least two distinct and very different groups that were often in conflict with one another. At the very heart of this dispute was the issue of Christian identity. To put the matter in simple terms, one faction required all followers of Jesus the Christ to belong to the people of Israel and to follow the Torah, while the other did not.¹⁴ The epistle to the Galatians amply demonstrates that the law-observant group required Gentiles to convert to Judaism and observe the Torah if they were to enter the Christian community. These opponents of Paul in Galatia were repeating and reinforcing the message James sent to Antioch some years before (cf. Gal. 2.11-14).¹⁵ Paul himself acknowledges this major rift between the followers of Jesus. His opponents preach a different gospel and he curses them on account of it (Gal. 1.8-9). Given that there was a deep division over the very issues of Christian identity and the criteria for membership in the Christian tradition, it is difficult to follow Bauckham's claim that the early Christian movement 'had a strong sense of itself as a worldwide movement'.¹⁶ So intense were these disagreements and divisions within the ranks of the Christians that it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of very different Christian movements rather than a single movement. Bauckham of course is well aware of the diversity within early Christian circles (p. 43), but he seems not to appreciate fully the consequences of this concession on this particular point.

In the light of the diverse and polemical nature of the early Christian factions, it is extremely improbable that any follower of Jesus the Christ would have classified the world, as Bauckham implies they did, simply into Christian and non-Christian. At the very least they would have divided the Christian category between true Christians and nominal but false Christians. This point has important ramifications for Bauckham's position on the intentions of the Evangelist. If he accepts

14. See Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 19-27.

15. Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 92-100.

16. Esler, 'Community and Gospel', p. 242, makes a similar point.

that these authors composed their Gospels for those they considered to be believers (i.e. true Christians) and not for those they considered to be non-believers, then it follows that they would have written only for those Christians who belonged to their particular traditions. Their intended readership would not include non-Christians, as Bauckham says, but neither would it include those Christians who belonged to any rival Christian group.

The second argument intended to render Bauckham's thesis credible is that concerning the mobility within Christian circles. In responding to Bauckham here, I accept that the Graeco-Roman world offered considerable opportunities for travel and communication, and that some Christians made use of these opportunities. But it is doubtful whether any of this substantiates Bauckham's overall point. It seems to me that the evidence relevant to the period of the Evangelists, the first century and the early second century, shows not that there was substantial movement between the whole Christian world, but only that there was constant contact between similar churches in restricted areas. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether Bauckham's presentation of the evidence has provided the full picture of the communication between the different Christian churches. Our sources strongly suggest that the rival Christian factions had little contact with one another. More importantly, on the occasions when there was communication between these groups, it was most often conducted in a spirit of hostility.

Let us consider the testimony of the Pauline epistles. The letters of Paul clearly attest to the great mobility and communication within the churches Paul established in Greece and Asia Minor in the 50s. These churches were a hive of activity with Paul and his co-workers constantly travelling from one church to another or maintaining contact by letter. But should we transfer this particular situation to the remainder of the Christian world? The evidence suggests that we should not. Once again the major issue here is the division within the ranks of the early Christians.

Even before Paul's mission to Greece and Asia Minor in the 50s, there seems to have been little contact between the two major Christian centres, the law-observant church in Jerusalem and the law-free church of the Hellenists in Antioch. Despite the evidence of Acts that there was close and fruitful communication between these churches in the 30s and 40s (Acts 11.22-30), Paul presents a rather different picture. In Gal. 1.18-2.1 he states that, after his visit to Jerusalem to meet with

Peter around the year 36, he did not travel again to Jerusalem until the apostolic council in the year 48. Since Paul here is telling the Galatians of his relationship with the Jerusalem church, the clear implication of this text is that there was no contact during this period between the Hellenist church in Antioch, where Paul settled after 36, and the Jerusalem church.¹⁷ Communication was resumed around the year 48, when James tried to impose the Torah on the Gentile Christians of Antioch, an act which led to the so-called apostolic council in Jerusalem. Whatever the outcome of this meeting,¹⁸ it is evident from Gal. 2.11-14 that James later intervened again in the affairs of the Antiochene church and this time was successful. Paul lost the battle at Antioch and thereafter pursued an itinerant and independent mission in the west.

During the next decade, the period of the Pauline epistles, Paul seemingly had no direct contact with either Antioch or Jerusalem (both of which now came under the authority of James). There is no indication in his letters that he either visited these Christian centres or wrote to them. For its part the Jerusalem church did meddle in the affairs of some Pauline churches during this period. We know from Galatians that certain Christian Jewish missionaries, almost certainly sent by the Jerusalem church, ventured into some of Paul's churches in an effort to undermine the apostle's missionary endeavours (see also Phil. 3.2-11),¹⁹ and the same epistle informs us of the apostle's hostile response. Perhaps on account of these incursions, Paul did eventually resume contact with the Jerusalem church. Around the year 58 he travelled to Jerusalem with the collection of monies donated by his Gentile churches, but this visit was clearly motivated by his desire to secure the favour of the Jerusalem church and end the enmity between them. Prior to this visit Paul was concerned that the collection of Gentile monies would not be accepted by James in Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 15.30-31), and the sketchy evidence we possess indicates that his pessimism was well founded.²⁰

The epistles also provide other information that speaks against

17. Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, p. 79.

18. Neither the Pauline version of this meeting in Gal. 2.1-10 nor the Acts account of it in ch. 15 can be taken at face value. We simply do not know the result of the apostolic council. See Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 79-92.

19. Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 100-103.

20. For discussion of the fate of the collection, see Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 166-69, and literature cited there.

Bauckham's position. The apostle and his co-workers were active and mobile only within their own specific (Pauline) mission field of Greece and Asia Minor. They did not, as noted above, travel to or write to the major Christian centres of Jerusalem and Antioch, nor did they visit or communicate with those Christian communities in other parts of Syria (e.g. Damascus) or in northern Africa (e.g. Alexandria). It is telling that Paul's first contact with the Roman church came only after he believed he had completed his mission in Greece and Asia Minor (Rom. 15.23), and it was initiated because Paul needed the support of this church to assist his future Spanish mission (Rom. 15.24). Moreover, the letters of Paul give no hint at all that any of these distant Christian churches sent emissaries or letters to touch base with the Pauline communities. Even Apollos, who came from Alexandria, does not provide evidence for such communication. Acts 18.24-28 implies that Apollos was an independent missionary rather than an agent of the Alexandrian church seeking contact with the Pauline churches. He did not even know of the Pauline gospel until taken aside by Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth. In any event Apollos became a member of Paul's missionary team (1 Cor. 16.12) and presumably thereafter had little or no contact with his former Christian colleagues in Alexandria.

Bauckham tries to bolster his argument by providing a list of significant Christians, who are mentioned in different locations (p. 34), but the validity of this evidence is doubtful. The major travels of Apollos and Silas occur in the context of the Pauline mission in the 50s. Others were forced to travel because of persecution or expulsion rather than a desire to visit other churches. Clear examples here are the Hellenists who fled from Jerusalem to other parts of the Roman empire, and Aquila and Priscilla (and perhaps others) who were forced to leave Rome because of the edict of Claudius (and then returned after his death). In other cases Bauckham's evidence does not depend upon the early Pauline letters, but upon the reliability of Acts and, in some instances, the writings of the church fathers, or the acceptance of very ambiguous evidence. The example of Peter may serve to illustrate this point. While Peter can definitely be placed in Jerusalem (Acts 1-8; 11-12; 15; Gal. 1.18; 2.1-10) and Antioch (Gal. 2.11-14), we should be far less confident about placing him, as Bauckham does, in Samaria (Acts 8.14-25), Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea (Acts 8.32-10.48), Corinth (1 Cor. 1.12), and even Rome (1 Pet. 5.13).

As further evidence of this close communication between the differ-

ent churches, Bauckham appeals strongly to the early second-century epistles of Ignatius of Antioch. Admittedly these letters do reveal a very active network among the churches stretching from Antioch to Rome, but what conclusion should we draw from this? By the time Ignatius wrote, the geographical area involved had become predominantly Pauline, and the bishop of Antioch and his fellow bishops had continued the practice established by Paul himself of close communication by visit and by letter. But, like Paul before him, Ignatius seemingly had little or no contact with Christians falling beyond this Pauline sphere. There is no mention in his letters of any contact, let alone close communication, with the Christians who lived to the east and south of Antioch or those churches in northern Africa. We are therefore dealing with a large network of similar churches in a broad but restricted area, and not with a network that encompassed the whole Christian world.

Bauckham infers from this evidence concerning the mobility of the early Christians that the Evangelists, as leaders of their own churches, belonged to this group of Christian travellers. It is, he argues, more plausible than not that the Evangelists had visited different churches and had spent time as recognised teachers in a number of churches. This conclusion certainly exceeds the evidence Bauckham has presented. It is of course possible that any given Evangelist had travelled to another church,²¹ but it is distinctly unlikely that it was a church aligned with a rival faction. The relevant evidence suggests that when the early Christians travelled they mostly did so within their own regional networks, so any churches the Evangelists visited would have been similar to their own. It is, in any event, a very large leap of faith to infer from the mobility of some Christians that any of the Evangelists were well travelled. Not all Christians had the means or the inclination to travel, and those who did not must have outnumbered considerably those who did. Nor must we assume that all the leaders of the Christian churches travelled as widely as Bauckham implies. There is little evidence, apart from the ambiguous reference in 1 Cor. 9.5, that James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, ever left Jerusalem. He is there when the church begins (c. 30 CE), he is there for Paul's visit to Peter in the mid-30s, he is there for the apostolic council in the late 40s, he is there when Paul travels to Jerusalem with the collection in the late 50s and he dies there in the early 60s. Even in the Pauline churches where

21. So too Esler, 'Community and Gospel', p. 240.

there was substantial movement by certain people, there were doubtless many church leaders who remained stationary. We know from 1 Thess. 5.12 that Paul appointed leaders to oversee the community in his absence, and these people could hardly fulfil these roles if they were constantly on the move.

The above discussion has shown that the early Christians were perhaps less mobile and less communicative than Bauckham suggests. But even if we grant his point, how much does it support his case that the Gospels were written for all Christians? In order to make this suggestion a real possibility, Bauckham needs to demonstrate that this favourable environment was exploited to this end by these followers of Jesus. He is required to provide contemporary evidence that at least some early Christians composed documents that were designed to be read by any and every church and not simply for a local community (or communities). Such evidence would strengthen his claim (though not prove it definitively) and correspondingly weaken the consensus position he seeks to disprove. Bauckham, however, is sadly let down by his sources. Even those texts cited above, which, according to Bauckham, betray a universal Christian identity, were still written for specific communities and not for general consumption. The relevant Pauline epistles were sent to the churches in Thessalonica and Corinth, 1 Peter was directed to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1.1), while Revelation was written for the seven churches of Asia (1.4).

The only contemporary parallel in the Christian tradition that Bauckham can find is the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which does state quite clearly that it was to be copied and sent to other churches (2.4.3). But this document does not support Bauckham's thesis in the manner he claims. It actually tells against his position in two ways. First, the text itself spells out that it was written specifically for the Roman church and to meet its particular needs (cf. 2.2.6; 3.8.10; 3.9.7).²² The fact that it was to be more broadly distributed, presumably to other Christian communities within its regional network, means only that the author intended his work to be read more widely than the primary readership. This, however, is quite different from saying that it was a document intended for all Christians. Secondly, it is significant that the author felt the need to advise his Roman readers to copy and then distribute his text to other churches. These instructions suggest that in this particular Christian

22. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 28.

network the practice of copying and circulating documents was not the norm.²³

Having discussed Bauckham's general arguments concerning the nature of 'the Christian movement', I want now to turn to his specific arguments that relate to the Gospels. These three arguments are intended to show that the Evangelists themselves wrote their Gospels for a very broad Christian readership. The first argument for consideration is Bauckham's preliminary point. Since both Matthew and Luke knew that Mark had circulated broadly in Christian circles, it seems rather improbable that they wrote their own Gospels merely for their own local communities.

This contention appears reasonable on the surface, but it breaks down under closer scrutiny. P.F. Esler has argued that the manner in which the later Evangelists used Mark leads in fact to the opposite conclusion.²⁴ Matthew and Luke clearly believed that Mark was wrong on a number of significant points, so they radically altered Mark's text in order to conform it to their own very different perspectives. This involved changing the wording at certain points, omitting some sections, expanding other sections or adding new material to cover points that Mark had missed or played down. The lesson they would have learnt from their own Gospel compositions, using Mark as a source, was that their own works would be just as much at the mercy of other Christians who did not share their particular viewpoint. They would therefore have been very mindful of the inherent dangers associated with writing for a general audience and expecting their message to be preserved intact; either their Gospels could be re-written (as happened with Mark) or they could be misinterpreted, either deliberately or accidentally, by those Christians who belonged to an alternative tradition. In the light of this, it is more probable than not that the later Evangelists would have composed their works for a limited readership: Christians of a similar persuasion who would read the Gospel in the way intended by the Evangelists.

The point that the Evangelists each had a particular perspective that they wished to transmit in their works requires further exploration in terms of Bauckham's thesis, especially his contention that the Gospels are open texts that were designed for any and every Christian reader. In

23. I owe this point as well to my colleague, Dr James McLaren.

24. Esler, 'Community and Gospel', pp. 241-42.

the course of his argument Bauckham says nothing of the Gospels being open or closed texts until right at the very end when making his hermeneutical observations. Using the categories of Umberto Eco, Bauckham identifies the Pauline epistles as 'closed texts' and the Gospels as 'relatively open texts'. Closed texts are those that 'define their implied reader very closely and also have a determinate meaning that depends on knowing what the implied reader is supposed to know', while open texts 'leave their implied readership more open and consequently leave their meaning more open to their real readers' participation in producing meaning' (p. 48). By writing open texts, the Evangelists were not very concerned about conveying a specific message, but were content to allow their future readers to interpret their works as they saw fit. Bauckham spells this out using Matthew as an example. He writes, 'For various late-first-century churches hearing Matthew's Gospel in differing situations Jesus' command to love one's enemies would have meant rather different things. *I do not think that Matthew would have minded at all*' (p. 48, italics added).

Bauckham provides no hard evidence that the Gospels were open-ended texts intended for an unspecified readership. He merely assumes that this was the case because the Gospels, unlike the Pauline epistles, provide no definitive identification of their intended readers. This explanation, however, is by no means the only one on offer. It is equally possible, perhaps more probable, that the lack of identification of the readers points to the proximity between the author and the Christian group for whom he was writing. The Evangelist, writing for his local community (and that community knowing that he did so), would see little purpose in identifying those for whom he was writing.²⁵ But the major problem for Bauckham's thesis resides in his further claim that the Evangelists deliberately wrote open-ended texts and were therefore unconcerned about how their documents would be understood. This proposition is especially difficult to accept.

The Gospel writers, regardless of any communities for which they may have written, had particular points of view concerning the significance of Jesus and the manner in which Christians should live their lives. On any theory of their intended readers, they wished to promote their own particular views and, whether implicitly or explicitly, to discredit alternative views. We must infer from this that each Evangelist

25. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 25.

believed that there was a correct interpretation of his Gospel, namely the understanding that coincided with his own. Other interpretations that varied from that particular perspective would doubtless have been viewed by him as incorrect or inappropriate. Bauckham actually concedes this important point. In responding to the potential objection that his thesis entails a denial of the diversity of the Gospels, he states that each Gospel writer 'wished to propagate his own distinctive theological rendering of the Gospel story among whatever readers it might reach' (p. 47). This statement, however, is difficult to square with the view, expressed on the very next page, that the Gospels were written as open texts, and that Matthew would not have minded in the slightest the manner in which his Gospel was understood. Bauckham cannot have it both ways. Either Matthew wished to disseminate 'his own distinctive theological rendering of the Gospel story', which means he intended his work to be read a certain way, or he consciously constructed an open text and left the interpretation up to the reader. There is a considerable tension in this aspect of Bauckham's work that requires resolution.

We come now to Bauckham's second specific argument, the genre of the Gospels. Bauckham's claim that the Gospel genre presumes a broad readership finds some support in the essay of R.A. Burridge, which argues that the Graeco-Roman authors of the *bios* genre intended their works to circulate widely and certainly did not compose them for small, localised groups.²⁶ The question here concerns how far it is permissible to push the analogy. Even if we grant that the Gospels belong in general terms to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, there is little similarity between the Evangelists and the classical biographers. The Graeco-Roman biographers were elite members of society who wrote about other well-known elite members of society for their elite contemporaries. Since none of this applies at all to the Evangelists and their Gospels, it remains unclear just what can be deduced from their adoption and adaptation of this particular genre.²⁷ They may have intended their Gospels to be distributed widely, but there is no necessity to suppose this to be the case. It is quite within the realms of possibility that they made use of this literary form with a smaller and more limited readership in mind.

26. Burridge, 'Gospel Genre and Audiences', p. 131-34.

27. See Esler, 'Community and Gospel', pp. 243-44, for other criticisms of Bauckham's argument.

This point is not merely theoretical. It is suggested by the later Christian Gospel tradition. A good number of Gospels were composed in the second and later centuries, and it is arguable whether any of these were intended for all Christians. Many of them were clearly composed by specific Christian groups for a very restricted readership. The Christian Gnostics, for example, composed their own Gospels, including the famous *Gospel of Thomas*, and these texts were designed exclusively for Gnostic readers. The later Christian Jewish sects also created their own Gospels. A.F.J. Klijn has argued that three of these Gospels were created for particular Christian Jewish groups in local areas (Egypt, Transjordan and Beroea).²⁸ If the Christians of the second and later centuries composed their Gospels for restricted and localised Christian readerships and not for general consumption, then it may well be the case that the canonical Evangelists did as well. Certainly the evidence of the later Gospel tradition should not be neglected in determining the intended readers of the canonical Gospels. Their witness is perhaps more relevant than the evidence of the Graeco-Roman biographers.

But even if we accept that the Gospel genre implies a broader readership than the Evangelists' local communities, does it confirm Bauckham's major argument that they were intended for all Christians? It is of interest that Burridge does not support Bauckham at this point. At the end of his discussion of the implications of the Gospel genre, Burridge concludes that the Gospels were designed to be read by specific Christian groups. He writes,

it is reasonable to assume that Matthew has as his target audience Christians from a Jewish background who have a high regard for the Mosaic law and who have suffered antagonism or persecution from other Jews... On the other hand, Luke is more likely to be aiming to explain Jesus' life and teaching for a Gentile market niche.²⁹

Burridge here notes the diversity within the Gospels and their distinctive viewpoints, and draws the correct conclusion. They were designed to be read by like-minded Christians and not, as Bauckham argues, by all Christians.

28. A.F.J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (VCSup, 17; Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 27-43.

29. Burridge, 'Gospel Genre and Audiences', p. 143. Burridge himself is not entirely consistent on this point. On p. 144 he comments that the intended audience of the Gospels probably included those inside and outside the Christian church.

Bauckham's third specific argument, that people in the ancient world communicated orally with their neighbours and wrote texts for wider circulation, suffers much the same fate. He draws a sharp distinction between the local audience implied by oral communication and a more general audience implied by written communication, which is simply not supported by the extant evidence. In her contribution to the same volume, L. Alexander warns that the evidence of ancient book production does not provide such a clear distinction between written and oral communication as Bauckham would like. She states,

it is clear that there is support for Richard Bauckham's contention that the writing down of the Gospels itself implies the crossing of an invisible boundary between the implicitly limited audience of an oral performance and the wider audience that can be reached by a written text... But the messiness of the process suggests that we should be careful about painting the divide in too rigid terms.³⁰

Alexander's warning is sound, for there is good evidence in the ancient Mediterranean world that authors who belonged to a wider movement wrote texts for their own local communities. The Qumran documents provide a clear and obvious example of texts that were written for the sole consumption of the community that produced them, even though that group was probably related in some way to the broader Essene movement.³¹ J. Marcus offers the further examples of the Jewish *Epistle of Aristeeas* and *Joseph and Asenath*, and the Christian text *The Teaching of Addai*.³² Any number of further Christian examples can be found in the later apocryphal literature. The Christian Jewish Gospels, as noted above, were confined to certain groups in restricted areas.

We may pause at this point to summarise the above discussion of Bauckham's evidence. It has been maintained that his two general arguments, which provide a credible background to his hypothesis, do not really carry conviction. The historical evidence indicates that the early Christians were deeply divided over the issue of Christian identity and would not have identified all followers of Jesus as members of the same worldwide movement. Nor does the evidence really support Bauckham's claim that there was constant communication and travel between the different Christian groups. His more specific arguments

30. Alexander, 'Ancient Book Production', p. 100.

31. So too Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 27.

32. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 27.

concerning the Gospels themselves are problematic as well. Two of these arguments, the implications of the Gospel genre and the written form of the Gospels, are actually refuted rather than supported by Bauckham's co-contributors. We may conclude that Bauckham's bold attempt to substantiate a new hypothesis concerning Gospel origins falls far short of success.

The Gospels and their Communities

We may now move to Bauckham's criticism of the consensus view. Even if he has failed to demonstrate that the Gospels were written for all Christians, does his attack on current Gospel scholarship have some merit? In my view Bauckham has correctly drawn attention to a serious problem in modern Gospel studies. In the past few decades, scholars have merely presumed the reality of the four Gospel communities and not provided any evidence for their existence. They have also assumed rather than argued that the communities in which the Evangelists lived were the sole intended readers of the Gospels. My own work on the Matthaean community is a typical example of this particular tendency in Gospel scholarship. Bauckham has made an important contribution by highlighting just how dominant a role these sorts of assumptions have played and continue to play in the interpretation of the Gospels. But demonstrating that scholars have assumed certain things about the Gospel communities is not the same as showing that these assumptions are wrong. What is necessary is a reconsideration of these assumptions in order to determine their validity or otherwise.

With regard to the existence of the Gospel communities, this seems to me to be a perfectly justifiable assumption. In the absence of any evidence that the Evangelists were isolated hermits, we have to assume that they lived in particular Christian churches. Even if they travelled periodically, each of them must have had a permanent base in one location or another. More importantly, given that the production of a Gospel was a difficult and painstaking activity requiring space, comfort and plenty of time for writing and reflection, then the physical act of composing such a document would most probably have been done solely in their home communities. Since these churches were the permanent bases of the four Evangelists, there should be no problem identifying them according to the standard terminology, the Matthaean community, the Markan community and so on. If it is accepted that we

can speak meaningfully of the four Gospel communities, then the next step is to determine whether or not these groups were the intended readers of the Gospels. Once again the most simple and obvious response is that they were. We can hardly imagine that John, for example, wrote his Gospel for other Christians and did not expect it to be read by those among whom he lived and with whom he prayed and worshipped. The real issue is whether the Gospels were written exclusively for these communities, as many scholars assume, or whether they were intended for a broader readership (but not for all Christians).

Since Bauckham traces the hypothesis that the Gospels were written for specific Christian churches back to the work of Streeter, it is advisable to assess his critique of Streeter's position. In his classic study Streeter had contended that the four Gospels originated in four major churches (Antioch, Rome, Caesarea and Ephesus), and that they were first read and cherished in these influential Christian centres. Their respective associations with these churches explain their later prestige and their eventual acceptance into the canon. Mark's connection with Rome (and the later support of the Roman church) guaranteed its continued existence, even though it was at risk of being supplanted by Matthew and Luke.³³ Bauckham responds to this general point by emphasising that it lacks concrete evidence, and he maintains that perhaps a more plausible reason for the survival of Mark is that this Gospel was associated with Peter (p. 15 n. 10). But it is questionable whether one can separate these two claims. The Petrine and Roman connections of Mark go hand in hand, and it is inherently unlikely that any supporter of Mark's Gospel would have emphasised its association with Peter to the exclusion of its Roman connections.

Moreover, Streeter's contention that the four Gospels had local support in different geographical areas is consistent with other evidence. It coheres well with the organisation of the early Christians in the first century and early second century into distinct regional networks, and it is supported by the witness of the later manuscript tradition. As J. Marcus notes, 'the existence of local manuscript types (Alexandrian, Western, Caesarean, Byzantine) is testimony to the strength and relative independence of the churches in which those manuscripts were preserved'.³⁴ A similar point is made by P.F. Esler. He appeals to the

33. B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 10-12.

34. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 26.

work of D.C. Parker on the text of Codex Bezae, which showed that the distinctiveness of this text was closely tied to a particular community in Berytus. Esler then poses the question, 'If local pressures could apply so strongly with respect to textform, why not to content?'³⁵

The most important argument that Streeter presents, however, is that the diversity of the Gospels is best explained by the hypothesis that they were written in and for different churches. Using Matthew and Luke as examples, he contends that the great divergences between these Gospels, including the special sources they used, indicate strongly that they were independent churches that were geographically remote from one another.³⁶ Bauckham attempts to negate the force of this point by arguing that Streeter has confused the community in which each Gospel was written with its intended readership. But has Streeter really confused the issue, or has he realised the obvious point noted above that no Evangelist would have written his Gospel with the hope or desire that his local church members would never read it? We simply cannot draw such a sharp distinction between the communities in which the Gospels were written and the intended readers of these documents.³⁷ Streeter's point is all the more defensible when we take into account that each Evangelist had a distinctive message to present and that this message was formulated to a large extent on the basis of local traditions. Those who would best appreciate this use of local traditions and best understand the specific perspective of the Gospel based upon these traditions would be those with whom the Evangelist lived and worshipped.

Bauckham's other point against the Gospels being written for local Christian groups is that none of the issues relating to the Gospel communities, as reconstructed by scholars, were confined to those churches alone. These situations must have been paralleled in other Christian communities, and this undercuts the prevailing view that the Gospels were written solely for the specific communities of each Evangelist. Even if we grant Bauckham his general point here, it proves nothing in terms of the intentions of the Evangelists. The Pauline epistles were written for particular Christian churches, but they contain material that was relevant to other Christian communities. The same might equally apply to the Gospels.

35. Esler, 'Community and Gospel', p. 238.

36. Streeter, *Four Gospels*, pp. 11-12.

37. In agreement with Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 27.

I would concede at this point that it is possible that one or more of the Evangelists wrote for a slightly broader readership than their own local communities, but I would quickly add that these readers must have been geographically close, known to the Evangelist, stood in the same theological tradition of the Evangelist and his church, and were experiencing the same sorts of difficulties. This concession would entail only a slight revision of the consensus position. We would need to broaden the definition of any given Gospel community and view it not as a single church, but as a cluster of churches linked by geographical proximity and a shared theological perspective. Nothing of significance would be lost by such a concession, and some scholars might in the future prefer to work with such a broader definition. But even if we accept this option as a more realistic view of the situation, I would still argue that the primary readerships of the four Gospels, those whom the Evangelists had first and foremost in mind when they wrote, were those Christians in their immediate circles.

The Reconstruction of the Gospel Communities

I want to turn briefly now to Bauckham's other major criticism of current Gospel scholarship. This concerns the practice of reconstructing the various Gospel communities from the contents of the Gospels themselves. Bauckham is extremely critical of those scholars who use the Gospels to reconstruct the communities of the Evangelists (and the history of those communities) instead of reading these texts as narratives about Jesus of Nazareth. He justifies his scepticism of this endeavour by observing and emphasising the many different reconstructions of the Gospel communities offered in recent scholarship. For Bauckham this diversity of conclusions makes this whole approach look like a 'historical fantasy' (p. 20).³⁸ This is indeed a surprising claim. It is common in historical reconstruction, particularly of the ancient past, for scholars to disagree among themselves.³⁹ Such disagreement does not mean that the approach is necessarily wrong; it simply means that the extant evidence can be interpreted in a number of ways. We need to remember that the divergence of scholarly opinion over the nature and history of the Gospel communities hardly stands alone in the discipline

38. Barton, 'Can we Identify the Gospel Audiences?', pp. 180-81, makes the same point with specific reference to the Matthaean community.

39. So too Esler, 'Community and Gospel', p. 240.

of New Testament studies (and related fields). It is just one area of dispute in a field where most historical questions have given rise to a range of alternative answers. If we take Bauckham's view to its logical conclusion, then almost every historical issue pertaining to the early Christians and the New Testament texts would be classified as a 'historical fantasy'.

The question remains, however, regarding the validity of interpreting the Gospels as windows into the communities of the Evangelists. The Gospels are, as Bauckham notes, ostensibly narratives about Jesus, so is it legitimate to use these texts to provide information about these Christian churches? This is a very complex question that cannot be answered here in any great detail, but a few general comments are in order.

We know that the Evangelists edited their sources in particular ways, and that each of them presented a distinctive portrait of Jesus and his mission. What motivated them to write the sorts of Gospels they did? Scholars who uphold the consensus view respond by arguing that the Evangelists shaped their Gospels in the light of their prospective readers, the communities in which they lived. The use of local traditions in each of the Gospels lends support to this contention. Given that there must be some correlation between the contents of the Gospels and their target readerships, it is an appropriate historical method to search the Gospels for clues about the nature of these communities. We can make judgements about the types of Christian churches they were by examining the manner in which they portray the teaching of Jesus. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew, for example, differ radically over the validity of the Torah. While the Markan Jesus declares all foods to be clean and thereby attacks the Jewish dietary laws (7.19), the Matthaean Jesus upholds the validity of the whole Torah (5.17-19). We may infer from this and other similar evidence in these Gospels that Mark wrote for a Christian community that did not observe the Torah, while Matthew wrote for one that did.⁴⁰

This process of reconstructing the Gospel communities from the contents of the Gospels themselves can be profitably utilised in other ways. Historical critics correctly contend that neither the Evangelists nor their readers lived in a historical vacuum; all of them experienced and were

40. For a detailed discussion of the Torah in Mark and Matthew, see Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, pp. 123-39.

much influenced by very real social, political and historical circumstances. Scholars have over many decades reconstructed from a variety of sources—Jewish, Christian and Roman—the various historical factors that affected the early Christians, both generally and in more restricted areas. Once again it is legitimate to explore the possibility that the Evangelists might have shaped and edited their Gospels in response to certain historical events and/or social conditions that affected their communities. Admittedly this historical (and sociological) approach to the Gospels has yielded diverse results, but there is a good measure of agreement as well that should not be ignored. For example, many scholars would argue that the Gospel of Mark, written in Rome in the late 60s, emphasises suffering and persecution because the Roman church had recently been the victim of an intense persecution by Nero. In the case of Matthew, which is most often located in Syria or Galilee, it is now commonly accepted that this Evangelist's harsh polemic against the scribes and Pharisees reflects a bitter conflict between Matthew's community and formative Judaism in the period following the Jewish war.

Bauckham clearly does not accept that such historical explanations are relevant to these early narratives about Jesus. But if he is to demonstrate that they are either invalid or inappropriate, then he is required to do more than merely identify the diversity of scholarly reconstructions of the Gospel communities. He needs to provide a better explanation of the questions posed by the Gospels themselves. Why does Mark in particular highlight the themes of suffering and persecution? Why does Matthew so sharply and consistently criticise the scribes and Pharisees? It is significant that Bauckham offers no explanations at all in his essay. While he does accept that the Gospels are very different from one another (pp. 45-46), he provides no reasons for these differences in content and emphasis. He simply leaves open the intentions and motivations of the Evangelists (p. 47). Yet this response is less than satisfactory. If Bauckham is to displace the historical and sociological approaches to the Gospels, then he is obliged to produce and demonstrate a better interpretative method that both accounts for the diversity of the four Gospels and explains their distinctive characteristics. His failure to do so is a good example of his unwillingness to engage the evidence at the level of the texts themselves.

Conclusions

Richard Bauckham's challenge to traditional Gospel scholarship cannot be judged successful. His thesis that the Gospels were written for all Christians in each and every Christian church is circumstantial in nature and lacks concrete support. But in presenting his alternative views, Bauckham has done Gospel scholarship a considerable service. He has rightly pointed out that scholars have for too long simply assumed both the existence of the Gospel communities and that these churches were the sole readers of the four Gospels. All scholars working in this field have been forced to reconsider some of their primary assumptions. Yet, as I have argued in this response to Bauckham, the assumptions made by most Gospel scholars are not without foundation. It is entirely valid to presume the existence of the Gospel communities, and the relevant evidence suggests that these Christian churches were either the sole or the primary intended readers of the Gospels. It is within the realms of possibility that any given Evangelist envisaged a broader readership, but these readers would have been very close to his own community in both geographical and theological terms. Bauckham has certainly generated debate on an important issue, and only time will tell whether his claims about the intended readers of the Gospels can maintain their present impetus.

ABSTRACT

Richard Bauckham has recently challenged the consensus view that the Gospels were written for local Christian communities. He suggests that this hypothesis has been more assumed than argued in Gospel scholarship, and he presents an alternative thesis that the Gospels were in fact written for all Christians. This study responds to both of these contentions. First, it maintains that Bauckham's arguments in favour of his hypothesis do not stand up to scrutiny; they are largely circumstantial and lack concrete support. Secondly, it provides evidence that scholars have been correct to identify the intended readers of the Gospels with the local communities of the Evangelists.

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