

Assignment Title:

Essay: Critically evaluate recent scholarly debates as to whether the four canonical gospels were written for a particular community or (also) for wider audiences. You may support your arguments with reference to the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of John.

Word Count: 2882

1. Introduction

Until recently the unquestioned consensus was that the Gospels had been written for the communities to which their authors belonged. As such they reflect the interests of the originating communities and offer a window into their lives. This view was challenged by Richard Bauckham who argued that the Gospels were written for all Christians, as the title of his edited volume suggests.¹ In proposing this thesis, Bauckham established another area for scholarly reflection and opened up the debate on the intended audience of the Gospels.

Bauckham's case is made enthusiastically and is appealing, but it is not without its issues. In this essay I will attempt to walk the tight rope between the two poles – “community” and “for all Christians” - and argue for an intermediate position: that the Gospels emanated from particular communities, were partly shaped by their interests but only offer limited insight into the lives of these communities. Crucially, I will conclude that, though, the Gospels were not written to be read by all Christians, the authors recognised their potential for dissemination.

2. The Consensus: The Gospels for specific communities

The scholarly consensus in recent decades has held that the canonical Gospels were written for specific communities or churches, in specific locations, with their own specific experience of faith in Jesus Christ and their own specific needs to enable them to follow him faithfully. Evidence of this thinking is found in the writing of Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) who asserted that Mark's Gospel was written for the fledgling church of Rome (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.6-7). If indeed the Gospels were written for a particular church, it is not difficult to make the transition to imagining that these gospels addressed particular issues affecting the church and their practice. As such, the gospels have been considered as offering a “window” into these early Christian communities.² The result is that the Gospel texts are composed of

¹ *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. by Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998).

² Edward W. Klink, 'Gospel Audience: The Current Debate', in *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, Library of New Testament Studies, 353 (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 7.

several layers: the narrative itself, the message its retelling seeks to convey, and an insight into the community for which it is written.³

This quest for the communities behind the gospels has been taken up particularly keenly by scholars of John's Gospel. J. Louis Martyn offers an allegorical reading of the story of the man born blind in John 9.⁴ In this incident Jesus gives the man the sight he had never had. Unfortunately, the healing took place on the Sabbath and attracted the ire of some religious leaders. After several twists, the story ends with the man being driven out of the synagogue (John 9:34). For Martyn, the story has two "levels", he draws a parallel between the man born blind and the Johannine community and concludes that this narrative reflects the Johannine Christians' exclusion from the synagogue.⁵ In the same year as Martyn's work was published, Raymond Brown finds even more re-enactments of the Johannine community's history in the narrative of the Gospel. John 1:35-37 parallels followers of John the Baptist joining the Johannine community.⁶ Chapter 4 portrays the Johannine community's missionary movement towards the Samaritans.⁷ Brown agrees with Martyn that Chapter 9 refers to the Johannine community's break with the synagogue.⁸ This consensus view holds that the Gospels shape the story of Jesus to reflect the experience, concerns and needs of the community for which they were written.

3. The Challenge: The Gospels for all Christians

This view that the Gospels offered an insight into the lives of the communities surrounding their authors was challenged in 1998 by Richard Bauckham who proposed that the Gospels were written for all Christians. This is a significant departure from the consensus as exemplified by Martyn and Brown. The starting point for Bauckham is to argue that the consensus is based on the "unargued assumption" that each Gospel writer wrote for a community of which he was

³ John Muddiman, 'The Gospel Message and the Gospels', in *The Biblical World*, ed. by John Barton (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 184.

⁴ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Third edition (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3239377/0>> [accessed 31 December 2022], Part 1, Chapter 2.

⁵ Martyn, Part 1, Chapter 2.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), <<https://archive.org/details/communityofbelov00brow/mode/2up>> [accessed 31 December 2022], p. 69.

⁷ Brown, p. 37.

⁸ Muddiman, p. 184.

a member to address the specific issues that that community faced.⁹ This assumption is based on tradition and has come to be accepted as self-evident. Bauckham objects to the community hypothesis on several other grounds. He rejects the “allegorical” reading of the Gospels. The Gospels are “ostensibly” about Jesus so why, Bauckham might ask, should they be read as telling the stories of the communities from which they allegedly emanated?¹⁰ Bauckham also highlights a methodological issue and detects in the consensus position a form of confirmation bias.¹¹ In other words, scholars will find evidence of a community behind the text if that is what they are looking for. Bauckham also claims to be the first to question the consensus.¹² Klink, who otherwise supports Bauckham, points out the question emerging in the work of Timothy Luke Johnson in the 1970s.¹³ What is sure is that Bauckham ignited the debate on the audience of the Gospels by creating another pole. At one extreme, the consensus view holds that the Gospels were written within a community for that community. At the other extreme, Bauckham envisages the far broader audience of all Christians.

4. The Gospel of John: Internal evidence

Sim, a proponent of the consensus view, attacks Bauckham for providing mainly circumstantial corroboration for his argument and for failing to support his position with internal, textual evidence from the Gospels.¹⁴ The fact that Sim does not supply significant internal evidence either may point to the difficulties involved in making either case on the basis of the text itself. Examples will be drawn from the John’s Gospel.

John 20:31 may be read as offering a purpose statement for the whole of the Fourth Gospel. The English “you” in this verse is a second person plural in the original Greek. In other words, the author is addressing several people. This grammatical feature would be necessary both in addressing a community and a broader audience. Reinhartz notes that this second person plural

⁹ Richard Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. by Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 11.

¹⁰ Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, p. 20.

¹¹ Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, p. 22.

¹² Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, p. 11.

¹³ Klink, p. 6.

¹⁴ David C. Sim, ‘The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 24.2 (2001), 3–27 (p. 9) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X0102400201>>.

is a feature of epistolary writing (for example, Gal. 1:6).¹⁵ Making this judgment depends on what genre the Gospel is, but at least superficially, the Gospels are not Epistles. The Gospel genre will be discussed later in this essay but the second person plural on its own is inconclusive in determining the audience of the gospel.

A distinctive feature of the Johannine gospel is its use of parenthetical remarks. These remarks serve to clarify the narrative and this device is used throughout the Gospel. In the NRSV, parenthetical remarks are shown by parenthesis, so 1:40-42 is rendered as:

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).⁴² And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

The bracketed comments explain what is being said, in this instance, by providing a translation of Greek and Aramaic terms. Who are these remarks intended for? They could be used equally as usefully to teach a close community as they could be used to help a broader audience understand the meaning of what is written. On their own, the parenthetical remarks do not help to determine the audience (though the example given above may point to a Greek-speaking audience with no knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic). This textual aspect is inconclusive in determining the audience of the Gospel.

Another Johannine distinctive when compared with the synoptic Gospels is that that Fourth Gospel does not depict exorcisms. This may betray an attempt at sanitising the account for a broader audience.¹⁶ But equally, it might show that exorcisms were not of interest to the community for which the Gospel was written. This evidence seems inconclusive also.

Finally, John's Gospel makes repeated reference to the unspecified "disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20). The vague nature of this description seems to point to an instance of insider knowledge where the reader/hearer is expected to know who is being referred to. From the point of view of the text alone, this is the most convincing argument in

¹⁵ Adele Reinhartz, 'Gospel Audiences: Variations on a Theme', in *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, ed. by Edward W. Klink, Library of New Testament Studies, 353 (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 138.

¹⁶ Klink, p. 9.

favour of the community consensus and would have been unintelligible outside of the community.

Taken as a whole, the text itself provides insufficient evidence to adjudicate in favour of either the community or Church-wide audience. I turn to more circumstantial factors to evaluate the debate surrounding the intended audience of the Gospels. To structure my discussion, I will use the four main facets of Bauckham's argument: the genre of the gospel, the need for written documents, the unity of the early Christian movement and, finally, the mobility of early Church leaders. I have made this decision because it is Bauckham's argument that has launched the current debate and invited subsequent discussion from other scholars in the field. The evidence surrounding the composition of the Gospels provides firmer ground to make an attempt at defining the intended audience of the Gospels.

5. The circumstantial factors in play

5.1 The genre of the Gospels

As has already been alluded to, establishing the exact genre of the Gospels plays a role in determining their intended audience. Bauckham claims that the consensus tradition has approached the Gospels as it would approach Pauline epistles.¹⁷ This means that scholars who espouse the view that the Gospel were written for the author's community sought to interpret the Gospels as "localized and particularised".¹⁸ In the case of the Epistles, it is necessary to reconstruct the communities in order to interpret the text as a letter addressed to that specific community. Klink is right to point out the challenges associated with this: even though the Pauline Epistles are addressed to a named community, it does not make their circumstances any clearer some 2000 year later when we only have access to the Paul's response to their situation.¹⁹ Why should it be any different for the Gospels? Approaching the Gospels like one would approach an Epistle does not seem to be a satisfactory solution.

A more satisfactory, though imperfect solution is that the Gospels are a form of Greco-Roman *bios*. In this Bauckham follows the work of Burridge who established that the Gospels shared

¹⁷ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 27.

¹⁸ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 27.

¹⁹ Klink, p. 7.

four features with classical *bioi*.²⁰ Bauckham insists that the Gospels being forms of *bios* would have a broad audience in mind.²¹ As such, for Bauckham and Burridge, they are unsuited for community use.²² Esler adds some nuance to the Gospels' definition as *bioi*. He states that the authors of *bioi* were members of the social elite which is in stark contrast to the membership of the early church. He also points out that the Gospels were written on cheaper codex, whereas *bioi* were written on scrolls. Far from derailing the case for the Gospels being forms of *bioi*, these two facts are actually consistent with texts emanating from an emerging and marginal religious cult. Bauckham is right to temper his assessment too and calls the Gospels "a special category of *bios*".²³

On balance, the case for the Gospel being "a special form of *bios*" is more convincing.²⁴ Even if the realisation is not identical to classical *bioi*, the adoption of this genre may point to a desire to emulate the *bioi*'s broad reach, using a well-known literary form of the day.

5.2 The need for written documents

In continuing to make the case for the Gospels not being Epistles, Bauckham brings up the topic of distance. Bauckham claims that Paul only wrote Epistles when geographical distance dictated it.²⁵ The point of writing is communication not permanence, Bauckham adds in a footnote.²⁶ A slight incongruence is slipping into Bauckham's argument. It seems strange that if communication is essential, that the epistolary form should be rejected. This allows Reinhartz to argue that the Gospel could then very well be written for the author's community.²⁷ A different form (*bios*) would indeed be required to write to one own's community, where a letter would be "odd".²⁸ Bauckham is on firmer ground, however, on the topic of teaching. For Bauckham, local teaching would be carried out orally. This "oddness" of writing to one's own

²⁰ Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Monograph Series / Society for New Testament Studies, 70, 1st paperback ed (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 111.

²¹ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 28.

²² Philip F. Esler, 'Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham's Gospels for All Christians', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 51.2 (1998), 235–48, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600050146>>, p. 243.

²³ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 28.

²⁴ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 28.

²⁵ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 29.

²⁶ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 29.

²⁷ Reinhartz, p. 139.

²⁸ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 28.

community is again at the forefront. Bauckham's argument recovers, however, when he argues that local teaching would be addressed orally. This seems convincing pastorally where a nimble approach to arising situations is required, but also in a culture with low literacy. Writing for a local situation seems unnecessary. However, this view must be tempered by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls that were written for a "somewhat isolated" community at Qumran.²⁹

5.3 Unity in the early Church

When he describes the unity of the early Church, one cannot but feel that Bauckham takes a rather idealistic view. For Bauckham, the early churches were not isolated communities, self-sufficient communities.³⁰ Rather the Church was a network of communities that not only sustained but sought to actively maintain regular communication. Unity reigned among these sometimes distant communities. Bauckham assumes Markan priority and from this derives the view that Matthew and Luke would have known Mark's Gospel. From there, they would have realised their Gospel's potential for dissemination and would have sought to replace Mark's work.³¹ The initial spread of Mark's Gospel may have spurred Matthew and Luke on in writing for a broader audience than their immediate surroundings. But the fact that Mark's gospel spread is also evidence that its contents have an appeal that goes far beyond the local. There is a sense in which, for Bauckham, Matthew and Luke were well aware of the potential for Gospels to spread and that the unity within the churches gave them the confidence that their work would be received far and wide.

Sim is not so positive. He points to deep division between Christians of Jewish and Gentile origin.³² He criticises Bauckham for the unity he defends. For Sim, the local churches would have been suspicious of each other and would have divided believers between "true and nominal but false" Christians.³³ Sim backs this up quite convincingly by drawing on the example of the lack of contact between the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem as documented by the book of Acts and Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal. 1:18-2:1). In this context, the Gospel writers become rivals, seeking to correct and, ultimately, to replace the others. So, for Sims, the Gospels can't be written for "all Christians" as Bauckham would argue. Instead, they are

²⁹ Reinhartz, p. 139.

³⁰ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 30.

³¹ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 29.

³² Sim, p. 10.

³³ Sim, p. 10.

written for, at best, those Christian who agree with the originating community and, at worst, to convict other Christians of the error of their ways. Equally, if these conditions are correct, any new Gospel would have been received with a high degree of suspicion and have the potential to cause further division.

Esler is similarly pessimistic about the unity of the very early Church. He focusses on the importance, in the Mediterranean world, of belonging to a group.³⁴ Following this, the Evangelist's primary allegiance would be to their community. While Esler focusses on the importance of groups, it could be said that he also caricatures Bauckham's conception of the evangelists as free agents.³⁵ Esler gives the impression that Bauckham sees the Evangelists as working independently, without interference or influence from a community, thus being at odds with the prevailing culture at the time. But we may say here the limits of Esler's social-scientific method. While he accuses Bauckham of applying 20th century standards to the world, Esler's approach is equally as distant in terms of time, if not geography from the context of the early church. But even Bauckham admits in his response to Esler that the same shaping of the Gospels under the influence of the community is not beyond his argument.³⁶ Even if the Gospels themselves were not written exclusively for their author's communities, it is conceivable that the communities' outlook played a part in shaping the retelling of the Gospel. Interestingly, Esler also adds that the consensus tradition's aim need not be to reconstruct that community behind the gospels but rather to understand how the Gospel betrays the way in which the community apprehended the story of Jesus.

It seems that unity among the early Church was far scarcer than Bauckham admits. Nevertheless, this lack of unity seems to not have completely inhibited the potential for documents, and indeed Gospels, to be spread.

5.4 High mobility in the Ancient World

Finally, Bauckham argues that the high mobility of the Ancient Mediterranean world would have been an ideal vehicle for the spread of the Gospels to all Christians.³⁷ He cites the example

³⁴ Esler, p. 238.

³⁵ Esler, p. 240.

³⁶ Esler, p. 249.

³⁷ Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?', p. 32.

of Paul and of the author of Revelation who must have had intimate knowledge of the seven churches he was writing to. In this sense, Christians communities may not have been completely closed in on themselves.

If Markan priority is indeed correct, the fact that the Gospel of Mark had spread and reached Matthew and Luke may have been sufficient reason for these authors to believe that their Gospel could reach a broader audience, if not all Christians.

6. Conclusion

In his 1998 article, Richard Bauckham constructed an argument in opposition to the received understanding of the Gospels as written for the communities from which they emanated. Bauckham argued that far from being limited to being read by their communities, the Gospels were written for all Christians.

In this essay, I have attempted to argue that:

1. The Gospels themselves provide insufficient evidence as to their intended audience.
2. The genre of the Gospels as a form of Greco-Roman *bios* betrays the Gospel writers' belief that their writing, at the very least, had the potential to be disseminated.
3. The Church context into which the Gospels were written is hard to qualify as united, but there remained, nevertheless the possibility that Gospels could spread, especially to try attempt to correct and replace the teaching of others.

I conclude that the Gospels were written from within communities and were somewhat shaped by them, but not exclusively for them. Even though the Gospel writers may not have intended their Gospels to be written for all Christians, they did, however, recognise that these works had the potential to spread further afield.

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