

For Whom Were Gospels Written?

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I

The title of this chapter could be analyzed into two distinct questions, only one of which it will attempt to answer. One of these questions is: Were Gospels written for Christians or for non-Christians? This question has sometimes been discussed, particularly in the case of the Gospels of Luke and John, since a minority of scholars have argued that those Gospels, or all four Gospels, were written as apologetic or evangelistic works, not for Christians but for outsiders.¹ On this question the present chapter takes for granted, without arguing the point,

1. For this argument with reference to all four Gospels, see C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 2/1 (London: SCM, 1967), 101-14 (113: "all four Gospels alike are to be interpreted as more than anything else evangelistic and apologetic in purpose"); and cf. H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 103 ("missionary and propagandist aspects" as well as "important functions within Christian communities"). For Luke, see C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, Trinity Press International New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 104-11. For John, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 87-95. M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 304, takes the view that Mark was written for two categories of individuals (not groups): Christians experiencing persecution and interested outsiders.

the answer given by the scholarly consensus: that all Gospels were intended to reach, in the first place, a Christian audience. For the purposes of the argument of this chapter, it needs only to be observed that, if any of the evangelists did envisage reaching non-Christian readers, they would surely have had to envisage reaching them via Christian readers, who could pass on copies of Gospels to interested outsiders through personal contact.² So the Christian audience would in any case remain primary.

The second question, which this chapter does address, is: Were the Gospels written for a specific Christian audience or for a general Christian audience? Was, for example, Matthew written for Matthew's own church, the so-called Matthean community, or was it written for wide circulation among the Christian churches of the late first century? Are a Gospel's implied readers a specific Christian community (consisting of one or more specific local churches), or are they the members of any and every Christian community of the late first century to which that Gospel might circulate? Whereas the first of our two questions has sometimes been discussed, with some substantial arguments deployed in its discussion, this second question is remarkable for having never, so far as I can tell, been discussed in print.

The point is not, of course, that this question is not relevant to the concerns of current or recent Gospels scholarship. Quite the opposite. One of the two possible answers to this question — the option that each Gospel was written for a specific Christian community — has been taken entirely for granted in most Gospels scholarship for some decades now.³ As an assumption on which arguments about the Gospels are based, it has come to play a more and more dominant role in Gospels scholarship, which since the late 1960s has become increasingly interested in reconstructing the circumstances and character of

2. This is consistent with the second-century evidence that the Gospels did find some non-Christian readers: Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 103.

3. Of course, some important works on the Gospels that show no interest at all in the question of their audience also continue to be published, e.g., H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

the community for which, it is assumed, each Gospel was written. Almost all contemporary writing about the Gospels shares the unargued assumption that each evangelist, himself⁴ no doubt a teacher in a particular church, wrote his Gospel for that particular church, with its particular situation, character, and needs at the forefront of his mind. The so-called Matthean, Markan, Lukan, or Johannine (or for that matter, Thomasine⁵) community may be understood as, not just one church, but a small group of churches, but in that case it is treated as axiomatic that this group of churches was homogeneous in composition and circumstances. The unargued assumption in every case is that each Gospel addresses a localized community in its own, quite specific context and character.

Nearly all the literature of the last few decades that makes this assumption and increasingly builds large and highly sophisticated arguments upon it seems to regard this assumption as completely self-evident, as though no alternative could ever have occurred to anyone. There is, of course, a perfectly obvious alternative possibility: 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. This is the possibility that the present chapter argues deserves to be given very serious consideration. The purpose of the chapter is not simply to challenge the established consensus but to open up a discussion that has never so far taken place. Not only has no one apparently ever, so far as I have been able to discover, argued for the consensus view in more than a few sentences; it is also the case that no one has ever argued for the

4. I refer to evangelists as male, not because the possibility of a female author of a Gospel can be excluded, but because what we know about authorship in the ancient world makes it relatively improbable.

5. For various reconstructions of the Thomasine community, see B. Lincoln, "Thomas-Gospel and Thomas-Community: A New Approach to a Familiar Text," *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977): 65-76; K. King, "Kingdom in the Gospel of Thomas," *Foundations and Facets Forum* 3, no. 1 (1987): 48-97; S. J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1993), especially chapters 5-7.

alternative view, which I shall propose as more plausible. There has never been any debate.

To challenge a scholarly consensus is inevitably and understandably to encounter resistance from readers immersed in the consensus. Such readers are naturally disposed to think that a consensus which not only is so universally accepted but which also has proved so fruitful in generating exciting and interesting work on the Gospels must be right. Any argument against this kind of consensus has an uphill struggle merely to gain an unprejudiced hearing, if there were such a thing. Therefore I begin with a preliminary argument whose function is merely to sow an initial seed of possibility that there might perhaps be something to be said for the view I shall propose.

I put this argument in a form that presupposes the most widely accepted view of Synoptic relationships, but it could easily be restated to accommodate any theory of Synoptic relationship. (None of the argument of this chapter depends on any particular theory of Synoptic relationships.) Since the present argument has to be stated in one form or another, I assume Markan priority. On the assumption of Markan priority, how is it that Matthew and Luke both had Mark's Gospel available to them? No one imagines all three evangelists belonged to the same local Christian community. So the view that is generally taken for granted is that by the time Matthew and Luke wrote, Mark's Gospel had already circulated quite widely around the churches and was being read in the churches to which Matthew and Luke respectively belonged. This is a very reasonable view, since we know quite certainly that at a slightly later date Mark's Gospel was known in churches other than Mark's own, wherever that was. Matthew and Luke, in other words, knew Mark as a Gospel that had in fact circulated quite widely among the churches and was proving to be useful and valued in many Christian churches. Whatever Mark had meant his Gospel to be, his work, when Matthew and Luke knew it, had already in fact come to be used and valued, not as a work focused on highly particular circumstances in Mark's own community, but as a work generally useful to various different churches. Matthew's and Luke's model for what a Gospel was must have been Mark as it was actually circulated and used in the churches. They must have expected their Gospels to circulate at least

as widely as Mark's had already done. They must have envisaged an audience at least as broad as Mark's Gospel had already achieved. Most likely Matthew and Luke each expected his own Gospel to replace Mark's. To suppose that Matthew and Luke, knowing that Mark's Gospel had in fact circulated to many churches, nevertheless each addressed his own Gospel to the much more restricted audience of his own community, seems *prima facie* very improbable. Such a view would need rather careful argument and certainly should not be treated as a self-evident axiom.

II

The way the current consensus on this issue has come about, without anyone ever having seriously argued the case for it, would make a significant topic for study in the history of New Testament scholarship. It could also provoke reflections, perhaps rather disturbing reflections, about the sociology and psychology of New Testament studies as a discipline. In this section of the present chapter, I can only indicate some broad features of the history of scholarship that provide background for engagement with the current consensus.

The view that each evangelist wrote for his own community is an old view in British scholarship, going back at least to the end of the nineteenth century, though it was not the only view in older British scholarship. The earliest example of it I know is in H. B. Swete's commentary on Mark (first edition, 1898), a major commentary in its time. Swete claims, in fact, that it was "the prevalent belief of the ancient Church" that "St. Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome and for the Roman Church."⁶ The idea here rests on patristic evidence, which Swete, like most of his contemporaries, accepts with little discussion. That Mark was written not only in Rome but also for the Roman church seems in fact to be based only on the account of Clement of Alexandria (*ap. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.6-7), which need not strictly require this

6. H. B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1909), xxxix; cf. xl.

conclusion.⁷ However, it is important to notice that for Swete Mark's intended readership is merely an aspect of the usual introductory questions about the Gospel; it has no significant consequences for exegesis. It does not occur to him that Mark adapted his thoroughly historical record of Jesus to address specific needs or issues in the Roman church. We are dealing with an idea that has at this date a very limited function in Gospels scholarship but which would come into its own when Mark was read as something other than a straightforwardly historical record.

At the same time as Swete, Alfred Plummer in his *International Critical Commentary* on Luke (first edition, 1898) takes a different view — at least of Luke's audience. Dismissing the idea that Luke wrote only for Theophilus, he claims: "It is evident that he writes for the instruction and encouragement of all Gentile converts."⁸ That Luke might have written for a specific church does not occur to him. But the view that each Gospel had a specific community in view must have been given considerable impetus in British scholarship by B. H. Streeter's book *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (1924), which was a landmark in English-speaking Gospels scholarship, establishing the dominance of the four-document hypothesis for a long time to come. Integral to Streeter's argument was the view that each of the four Gospels must have originated in a major center of Christianity (in fact, respectively Antioch, Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus). Only this, in his view, accounts for the prestige of all four and their eventual canonization. They acquired this prestige not simply by having originated from these important churches but from having been originally used in these churches: "each of the Gospels must have attained local recognition as

a religious classic, if not yet an inspired scripture, before the four were combined into a collection recognized by the whole Church."⁹ Mark in particular survived the competition from Matthew and Luke because of the prestige it had acquired locally as the Roman church's Gospel. In my view there are serious flaws in this argument,¹⁰ which need not detain us because the argument is rarely found today, but we should note that, if it is true that the idea of the Gospels as local Gospels (Streeter's term) became popular as a result of Streeter's work, then it did so on the basis of a single argument that has long since been forgotten by most who exploit the idea for purposes unknown to Streeter. In any case, Streeter would seem to be one of the first scholars to stress the local origins of all four Gospels in such a way as to fuse the two questions of the local context in which a Gospel was written and the audience for which it was written.¹¹ As he puts it, "The Gospels were written in and for different churches"¹² — a statement that encapsulates the axiom of the current consensus which I wish to question.

A most interesting representative (still within British scholarship) of the process by which the consensus has come about is G. D. Kilpatrick's *The Origins of the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1946). Some readers may be surprised to find at this date so strong an emphasis on the specific *Sitz im Leben* in which the Gospel was written and its formative influence on the making of the Gospel. Kilpatrick is already discussing the major issues that those who write about the kind of

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

10. Even if the four Gospels originally had the prestige of being the local Gospels of particular major churches, there is no evidence at all that this factor was operative in the second century, when the survival of all four to form the four-Gospel canon was at stake. The association of Mark's Gospel with Peter is far more likely to have been a major factor in the survival of Mark alongside Matthew and Luke.

11. B. W. Bacon, *Is Mark a Roman Gospel?* Harvard Theological Studies 7 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919) also fuses these questions, in relation to Mark. Though his argument is almost entirely concerned with the location in which Mark was written, occasionally he reveals that for him this is the same question as that about the implied readership of Mark (66, 85).

12. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 12.

context in which Matthew originated still discuss. A chapter on "The Gospel and Judaism" covers the now very familiar ground of relating Matthew to late-first-century developments in Judaism and in Jewish-Christian relations. In a chapter on "The Community of the Gospel" he speaks of "the Matthean church" and uses the clues provided by the Gospel to argue that the church in which Matthew wrote was well-to-do, had a ministry of prophets and teachers, was suffering persecution, was imperiled by false teaching, and so on. Crucially, he takes it for granted — without argument — that the church in which Matthew wrote was the church for which Matthew wrote.¹³ His reconstruction of the Matthean community and its context in fact depends on this assumption, since it presupposes that everything Matthew implies about his readers is specifically true of his own church.

Kilpatrick's book is the direct ancestor of the way recent major commentaries on the Gospels — for example, Davies and Allison on Matthew,¹⁴ Fitzmyer on Luke¹⁵ — discuss the introductory questions about the Gospels, simply assuming that the question about the context in which a Gospel was written and the question about the audience for which a Gospel was written are the same question. Such discussions therefore regularly and systematically confuse the evidence for these two different questions. Precisely in the context where one might expect to find *arguments* for the view that has become the consensus — in discussions of the conventional set of introductory questions about Gospels — one finds only the assumption of precisely what needs to be proved and a consequent confusion of issues.

Latent in Kilpatrick's method of reconstructing the Matthean community's character and situation from the Gospel was the potential for

13. G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 130.

14. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 138-47.

15. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 57-59. Other recent examples are D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993), lxx-lxxi; U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, trans. W. C. Linss (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 82-90.

reading the Gospel as addressing the particular needs and concerns of the community. Though this potential is mostly undeveloped in Kilpatrick's book, the book does show how well the ground was already prepared, in English-speaking scholarship, for the approach that developed within redaction-critical studies, especially of Mark, in the 1960s and 70s. Not all redaction critics were especially concerned with the evangelist's community; some used redaction criticism primarily as a means of highlighting the particular theology of each evangelist, without relating this theology to a specific community and its situation. But in the late 1960s and 70s a series of books developed an approach that aimed to reconstruct the distinctive features of the Markan community and to explain the Gospel as addressing specific issues within the community. Best known of the pioneering books along these lines is Theodore Weeden's *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (1968), which also marks the rise of American Gospel scholarship to leadership in this field, but the approach is also found, for example, in the German work of K. G. Reploh, *Markus, Lehrer der Gemeinde* (1969). It is characteristic of these works that they take it entirely for granted that a Gospel was written for a particular church. They do not even treat this as a working hypothesis that their work may show to be plausible. They treat it as self-evident fact, on which their work can build. This is the point, crucial in the history of Gospels scholarship, at which an unargued assumption, previously confined to discussions of introductory questions, became the basis for interpretative strategies that found the specific circumstances and needs of a particular community addressed in a Gospel.¹⁶

16. An illustration of the axiomatic status so widely attributed to this assumption can be found in J. R. Donahue, "The Quest for the Community of Mark's Gospel," in *The Four Gospels 1992*, ed. F. Van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. Van Belle, and J. Verheyden, Festschrift for F. Neirynck; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 100 (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peters, 1992), 2:817-38. He surveys attempts to locate the origin of Mark's Gospel and to identify the "Markan community" as the Gospel's implied readership (treating, as usual, the two issues as the same), refers to the "interesting questions about the whole enterprise of the quest for the communities behind the gospels" raised by M. A. Tolbert (835), who argues that Mark was not written for a specific local community but for a wide readership, and continues: "Even if this total

The redaction critics often complained that form criticism, despite its professed emphasis on the Christian community as the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel traditions, always considered the community in highly general terms. The only distinctions between communities that mattered to form criticism were the much-used categories of Palestinian Jewish Christianity, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, and Gentile Christianity. Moreover, when the great form critics, Dibelius and Bultmann, did discuss the written Gospels as the end products of the oral tradition, the community dimension seemed to disappear entirely. The redaction critics were intent on much more specificity. For example, Howard Kee in his *Community of the New Age* writes:

What was the *Sitz im Leben* from which and for which Mark's gospel was written? To answer that question responsibly it is not sufficient to attach a general label to Mark — such as Hellenistic-Jewish-Christian, or Palestinian-Jewish-Christian. By analysis of the text itself, but with the aid of paradigms for the study of eschatological communities as well as historical analogies with apocalyptic communities close in space and time to primitive Christianity in the first century, it should be possible to trace the contours of the Markan community.¹⁷

Study of Mark along these lines led the way; that of Matthew and Luke for the most part followed rather belatedly. But it is important to notice that developments in Johannine scholarship kept close pace with Markan scholarship. Since form criticism and redaction criticism as applied to the Synoptics were not usually thought appropriate to the

skepticism may be unwarranted . . ." (836). While this sounds as though some skepticism might be warranted, Donahue proceeds merely to throw doubt on the use of some kinds of evidence for reconstructing Mark's community (836-37). That Mark's implied readership was his own community, which improved methods will be able to reconstruct, he never for a moment doubts. That the "interesting questions" raised by Tolbert require this unargued assumption to be examined seems to be a thought Donahue is so incapable of taking seriously that he fails to recognize it even while stating it.

17. H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 77.

special case of the Fourth Gospel, Johannine scholarship pursued its own peculiar path, increasingly a highly introverted field of scholarship. Books on the Fourth Gospel rarely refer to Synoptic scholarship, or books on the Synoptic Gospels to Johannine scholarship. But the appearance of the first edition of J. L. Martyn's vastly influential *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* in 1968 can hardly be unrelated to the work of Weeden and others on Mark at precisely that time (and also in America), though Martyn makes no reference to them. Martyn's book does for John what Weeden and others did for Mark. John Ashton calls it, "for all its brevity . . . probably the most important single work on the Gospel since Bultmann's commentary,"¹⁸ since it was the source of that obsession with the Johannine community that has dominated most subsequent Johannine scholarship.¹⁹ That the Johannine community is the implied audience of the Fourth Gospel and that this community can therefore be reconstructed from the Gospel are assumptions that began to affect Johannine scholarship largely from the publication of Martyn's book onwards. No more than the Synoptic scholars does Martyn offer any argument for the assumption that John addresses his own community.

The sustained attempt since the late 1960s to take seriously the claim that each Gospel addresses the specific situation of a particular Christian community has had two main characteristics. One is the development of more or less allegorical readings of the Gospels in the service of reconstructing not only the character but the history of the

18. J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 107. Cf. D. Moody Smith, "The Contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John," in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John*, ed. R. T. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa, J. L. Martyn Festschrift (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 293 n. 30: "Martyn's thesis has become a paradigm, to borrow from Thomas Kuhn. It is a part of what students imbibe from standard works, such as commentaries and textbooks, as knowledge generally received and held to be valid."

19. The "Johannine community" as the implied readership of the Fourth Gospel first enters — unobtrusively but momentarily — Ashton's survey of the history of Johannine scholarship at the point where he discusses Martyn's work (Ashton, *Understanding*, 108).

community behind the Gospel. Characters and events in the Gospel story are taken to represent groups within the community and experiences of the community. The disciples in Mark stand for proponents of a *theios-aner* Christology that Mark is fighting within his community, the relatives of Jesus represent the Jerusalem Jewish Christian leaders, Nicodemus stands for Christians whose inadequate Christology prevents them from making a complete break with the synagogue, and so on. The successful mission of Jesus and the disciples to Samaritans in John 4 is supposed to reflect a stage in the history of the Johannine community when it engaged in successful mission to Samaritans. Weeden pioneered this way of reading Mark, and Martyn this way of reading John. There have been many subsequent reconstructions of the history of the Markan and Johannine communities. The many different reconstructions throw some doubt on the method, which to a skeptic looks like a kind of historical fantasy.²⁰ It is difficult to avoid supposing that those who no longer think it possible to use the Gospels to reconstruct the historical Jesus compensate for this loss by using them to reconstruct the communities that produced the Gospels. All the historical specificity for which historical critics long is transferred from the historical Jesus to the evangelist's community. The principle that the Gospels inform us not about Jesus but about the church is taken so literally that the narrative, ostensibly about Jesus, has to be understood as an allegory in which the community actually tells its own story.

The second characteristic of work in this tradition is the increasingly sophisticated use of social-scientific methods for reconstructing the community behind each Gospel. For Mark this began with Kee's *The Community of the New Age* and for John probably with Wayne Meeks's enormously influential 1972 article on Johannine sectarianism.²¹ Philip Esler pioneered such work on Luke

20. For a survey of the very varied attempts to reconstruct the Johannine community and its history, drawing an appropriately skeptical conclusion, see T. L. Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15-21.

21. W. A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44-72; reprinted in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. J. Ashton (London: SPCK, 1968), 141-73.

(1987),²² while Matthew has recently become a major focus, with Andrew Overman's *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (1990),²³ and several essays in the multi-authored volume *Social History of the Matthean Community* (1991).²⁴ Once again it has to be said that virtually all this work takes the usual unargued assumption for granted. Unexceptionable arguments for the use of social-scientific methods to study the relation between a literary work and its social context are simply applied to the unexamined premise that this relation means, in the case of a Gospel, its dual relationship to a single context in which it was written and for which it was written. It is this assumption, built into the use of the social-scientific methods from the start, that produces reconstructions of communities each

22. P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Esler is a rare case of a writer who sees some need to argue for the view that a Gospel, in this case Luke, was addressed to a specific Christian community or at least group of communities. But his argument (24-25) is premised on the validity of the common view that each of the other three canonical Gospels was addressed to its own community and is merely concerned to rebut the views of those who see Luke-Acts as an exception to this otherwise general rule. Thereby he gives the impression that little argument is actually needed. The evidence he offers is the use of the image of the flock for Jesus' disciples in the Gospel (Luke 12:32) and for the church at Ephesus in Acts (20:17-35); the way this image is used evokes the circumstances of "a small Christian community beset by difficulties from within and without" (25). The implication is that, since the whole church was not such a community, Luke-Acts does not address the whole church, but one such community. However, if Luke wrote for a general Christian audience, this means he wrote for any and every specific community to which he could expect his work to circulate. At the end of the first century, any such community would be a small community beset by difficulties from within and without. Luke could easily expect any Christian community to find such imagery appropriate to itself. What is actually striking about Paul's address to the Ephesian elders is how generalized the language is. The reference to false teaching could refer to any kind of false teaching.

23. J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

24. D. L. Balch, ed., *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

apparently unrelated to the rest of the Christian movement, each apparently treating itself self-sufficiently as *the* Christian social world. In this respect recent social-scientific studies of the Gospels are directly continuous with redaction criticism. Though asking different questions about the relationship between a Gospel and its original audience, they have taken over without question the same unargued assumption about the definition of the implied audience.

III

At this point I need to address this question: Even if I am right that the assumption that each Gospel was written for the evangelist's own community has come to be widely accepted largely without having been argued, might one not suppose that this assumption has been *confirmed by the results* that Gospels scholarship has built upon it? A large body of literature has been devoted to reconstructing each Gospel's own community and illuminating each Gospel by reading it as addressed to that reconstructed community, with its particular theological views and debates (the main concern of earlier redaction criticism), its particular social composition and social context (the concern of more recent study with social-scientific ingredients), even its own history (elaborately reconstructed in Johannine scholarship especially). A properly argued case for the view I am disputing would certainly have to draw on this work, but the work itself does not constitute such a case. With only occasional exceptions in detail, this body of scholarship does not proceed by arguing that certain features of a Gospel text are explicable only if understood as addressed to a specific Christian audience rather than to a general Christian audience. Its results are the results of applying to the text a particular reading strategy, not of showing that this reading strategy does better justice to the text than another reading strategy.

The point can be illustrated by observing what goes on in typical instances of this reading strategy. One form of it consists in applying to a specific Christian community textual implications that would readily apply to a very large number of Christian communities. Take,

for example, J. Louis Martyn's classic argument that chapter 9 of the Fourth Gospel should be read, on one level, as a narrative of the Johannine community's expulsion from its local synagogue.²⁵ Does this constitute evidence that the Gospel addresses the specific situation of the evangelist's own community? Not at all, not even if one wholly accepts Martyn's account of when and how the expulsion of Jewish Christians from synagogues occurred. Precisely Martyn's own argument, that the introduction of the *Birkat ha-Minim* into synagogue liturgy late in the first century had the effect of forcing Jewish Christians out of synagogues,²⁶ is an argument for a general process that, if he is correct, must have been going on in many diaspora cities where Jewish Christians had previously attended synagogue. If John 9 addresses that situation, it addresses, not a circumstance peculiar to the Johannine community, but a circumstance that would have been common in the churches of the late first century. Only because Martyn starts with the presupposition that the Fourth Gospel was written for the Johannine community, and because he has no intention of trying to prove this

25. J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), part I.

26. I accept Martyn's case here for the sake of argument, but it needs radical reassessment in the light of more recent discussion of the *Birkat ha-Minim*: see P. Schäfer, "Die sogenannte Synod von Jabne: Zur Trennung von Juden und Christen im ersten/zweiten Jh. n. Chr.," *Judaica* 31 (1975): 54-64; R. Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. E. P. Sanders and A. I. Baumgarten, vol. 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period* (London: SCM, 1981), 226-44; W. Horbury, "The Benediction of the Minim and the Early Jewish-Christian Controversy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982): 19-61; S. T. Katz, "Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity After 70 C.E.: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 43-76; R. A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, Studia Post-Biblica 37 (Jerusalem: Magnes, Leiden: Brill, 1988), 102-7; P. S. Alexander, "The Parting of the Ways from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism," in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. J. D. G. Dunn, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 66 (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1993), 1-25; R. Bauckham, "The Apocalypse of Peter: A Jewish Christian Apocalypse from the Time of Bar Kokhba," *Apocrypha* 5 (1994): 87-90.

point, can his argument function for him to characterize only the Johannine community's relationship to the synagogue.

The same consideration applies to many such arguments. Probably most Christian communities in the period when the canonical Gospels were being written were located in cities, contained both Jewish and Gentile members, including Gentiles who had been attached to the synagogue, and included some people, even if not many, from both ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

If it is objected that such features, while not confined to one specific community, would still not have been true of every Christian community, then it is time to introduce the second aspect of the reading strategy that I observe in such arguments. This consists in supposing that all textual indications of the character and circumstances of the audience must all apply to the whole of the implied audience. Then one need only compile all such indications in order to produce an identikit description of the evangelist's community. However, supposing the Gospels were written for general circulation and therefore envisage the range of audiences their authors might expect them to acquire in the churches of the late first century, then there is no reason at all why every aspect of a Gospel should be equally relevant to all readers or hearers. An evangelist might well address features of Christian life and social circumstances he knew to be fairly widespread in his time, without supposing his Gospel would therefore have no appeal or use in churches lacking some of these features. If so, he was right: the four canonical Gospels survived precisely because within a fairly short space of time they did prove relevant enough to most churches to come to be used very widely.

The argument that not everything in a Gospel need be there for all readers applies also to other types of material. When John finds it necessary to explain what the words *Rabbi* and *Messiah* mean (explanations which it is hard to believe even diaspora Jews would require), this need only imply that some of his readers would need such explanations, not that all or even a majority would need them. When Mark tells us that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus (15:21), he need only be supposing that these persons would have been known in a significant number of churches, which is entirely

possible,²⁷ not that every church to which his Gospel might circulate would have heard of them. Knowing these names already would give added significance to Mark's narrative for those who did know them, but not knowing them would be no impediment to other readers.

A third aspect of the reading strategy adopted by the current consensus is that the strong commitment of interpreters of the Gospels to the project of reconstructing each Gospel's community from the text leads them to understand as indications of the nature of a Gospel's implied audience features of the text that need not be so understood at all. For example, it is not obvious what the study of the social status of characters in Mark's Gospel can tell us about the social status of Mark's

27. E. Best, "Mark's Readers: A Profile," in *The Four Gospels 1992*, ed. Van Segbroeck, Tuckett, Van Belle and Verheyden, 2:857, rejects the identification of this Rufus with the Rufus of Romans 16:13, which has often been used to locate Mark's Gospel in Rome, on the grounds that "Rufus was not an uncommon name" (he might have added that Jews used it as the Latin equivalent of Reuben), and continues: "There is no reason to suppose that Mark's Rufus and Alexander were widely known; if they were not this implies that Mark was writing to a very limited group of people, probably all living in the same place. However widely the Gospel may be known today the original audience was very limited and probably confined to one small area." But this is highly tendentious argument. If there is no reason to suppose that Mark's Rufus and Alexander were widely known, neither is there any reason to suppose that they were not widely known. Where lies the burden of proof? That only Mark mentions them is no reason to suppose they were not widely known, since our evidence about individual Christians in the period is extremely limited. For example, it is clear from Romans 16:7 that the apostles Andronicus and Junia were widely traveled and widely known, but they are nowhere else mentioned in the surviving literature. That Matthew (27:32) and Luke (23:26) omit reference to the sons of Simon of Cyrene might be due simply to their habitual practice of abbreviating Mark. It might indicate that they were less confident than Mark that readers of their Gospels would know of Alexander and Rufus, which would be consistent with the hypothesis that Alexander and Rufus were well known in some, but not all, of the churches to which Mark could expect his Gospel to circulate. Finally, the difference between the Synoptic evangelists here might indicate that Alexander and Rufus were alive when Mark wrote, dead when Matthew and Luke wrote. In the light of these various possibilities, Mark 15:21 is an extremely insecure basis for supposing that Mark's implied audience is a limited circle of Christians.

implied audience.²⁸ To suppose that one must correspond closely to the other presupposes far too crude a notion of the way readers find stories relevant to themselves. It also begs questions about the scope Mark allowed himself to manipulate his traditions. Should we really suppose that, had Mark been writing for a church composed largely of very wealthy people, he would have omitted all the stories of destitute beggars that occurred in the traditions about Jesus he knew and created numerous stories about wealthy people welcoming and following Jesus? In this, as in other aspects of our topic, a highly debatable method is employed without debate because the overall interpretative aim seems to require it. A Gospel text has to be treated as transparently revelatory of the community for which it was written because the interpretative aim of reconstructing this community would be defeated by any other kind of text.

In conclusion, therefore, the relative success of a reading strategy based on the assumption that a Gospel addresses a specific community is no proof at all that a reading strategy based on the contrary assumption would not be equally or even more successful.

IV

The rest of my argument in this chapter aims to establish the antecedent probability that someone writing a Gospel in the late first century would have envisaged the kind of general Christian audience which the Gospels in fact very soon achieved through circulation around the churches.

The first stage of the argument consists in contrasting Gospels and Pauline epistles.²⁹ This stage is important because what the consensus I

am attacking has in effect done is to attempt to treat Gospels hermeneutically as though they were Pauline epistles. In other words, scholars have sought to see the audience and therefore also the message of the Gospels in just as local and particularized terms as those of the major Pauline letters, which certainly are addressed to specific Christian communities and envisage the specific needs and problems of those communities. The fact that our reading of 1 Corinthians, for example, is therefore illuminated by our attempts to reconstruct the specifically Corinthian situation Paul addressed has led Gospel scholars to seek the same kind of illumination of Gospel texts by reconstructing the specific church context in which they originated. However, Gospels are not letters, and to appreciate the crucial difference we need to put together two considerations.

The first is the question of genre. It is a special quality of the letter genre that it enables a writer to address specified addressees in all the particularity of their circumstances.³⁰ Even if other people read 1 Corinthians (as they fairly soon did), the genre encourages them to read

[Matthew] wrote" as "a cluster of Christian churches which are defining themselves over against local synagogues" (2), "minority groups living in the shadow of thriving local Jewish communities" (3). Even if the latter description of the implied audience is justifiable, it is not clear to me why it requires Stanton still to think of the implied readership as a defined rather than an open category. The description could apply to Christian communities in many cities of the Roman Empire, and Matthew could easily have supposed that many churches of which he knew little or nothing, to which his Gospel might well find its way, would be in such a situation. Stanton's argument is restated in "Revisiting Matthew's Communities," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 9-23, with more emphasis on the issue of genre (11: "Matthew's *gospel* should not be read as if it were a Pauline letter," cf. 22), more strictures against the attempt to derive "detailed" information about the social setting of the first recipients" (11), rejection of the view that Matthew would have written so carefully crafted a *bios* for a single house church which could have composed no more than fifty people (11-12), and reassertion of the view that the implied audience must be "a loosely linked set of communities over a wide geographical area" (12).

30. Of course, the letter genre *can* be used to address a very wide audience in very general terms. It is a mistake to regard a circular letter such as 1 Peter as less genuinely a letter than Philemon. But the letter genre does enable particularity of address to specific readers to an extent that no other ancient literary genre does.

28. An example of this approach is R. Rohrbaugh, "The Social Location of the Markan Audience," *Interpretation* 47 (1993): 380-95.

29. Cf. G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 45 ("Matthew is writing a gospel, not a letter"), 50-51. Here Stanton queries the hypothesis of a Marthean community as the Gospel's implied audience and thinks it "more likely that Matthew, like Luke, envisaged that his gospel would circulate widely" (51). Elsewhere in the same collection of essays he still speaks freely of "the Marthean community." In the introduction (adopting a compromise?) he speaks of "the communities to whom

it as a letter addressed to the Corinthians. To some extent every attentive reader of 1 Corinthians has always felt obliged to imagine what the specifically Corinthian situation Paul addressed was. This is not the case with the Gospels. From the second century to the mid-twentieth century no one ever supposed that the specific situation of the Marthean community was relevant to reading the Gospel of Matthew.

Of course, the genre of the Gospels is debated, but recent discussion³¹ has very much strengthened the case — in fact has all but conclusively established the case — that contemporaries would have recognized them as a special category of the Greco-Roman *bios* (which we can translate “biography” provided we understand the term in the sense of ancient, not modern biography). Although the implied readership of the ancient biography is a topic which might repay investigation, it seems unlikely that anyone would expect a *bios* to address the very specific circumstances of a small community of people. A *bios* certainly aimed at relevance to its readers. Its subject could be depicted as a moral or religious inspiration to its readers. It could be highly propagandist literature, recommending a political, philosophical, or religious point of view. But its relevance would be pitched in relatively broad terms for any competent reader.

However, the full force of the difference of genre will come home to us only if we add a second consideration. We need to ask, about both an apostolic letter and a Gospel, the question: Why should anyone write it? — by which I mean: Why should anyone put this down *in writing*? In the case of 1 Corinthians, for example, the answer is clear: Paul could not or preferred not to visit Corinth. Paul seems only to have written anything when distance required him to communicate in writing what he would otherwise have spoken orally to one of his churches. It was distance that required writing, whereas orality sufficed for presence. So the more Gospels scholarship envisages the Gospels in terms approximating to a Pauline letter, addressing the specific situation of one community, the more odd it seems that the evangelist is supposed

31. See especially R. A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

to be writing for *the community in which he lives*. An evangelist writing his Gospel is like Paul writing 1 Corinthians while permanently resident in Corinth. Paul did not do this, so why should Matthew or the other evangelists have done so? Anyone who wrote a Gospel must have had the opportunity of teaching his community orally. Indeed, most Gospels scholars assume that he frequently did so. He could retell and interpret the community's Gospel traditions so as to address his community's situation by means of them in this oral context. Why should he go to the considerable trouble of writing a Gospel for a community to which he was regularly preaching? Indeed, why should he go to such trouble to *freeze* in writing his response to a specific local situation which was liable to change and to which he could respond much more flexibly and therefore appropriately in oral preaching?

The obvious function of writing was its capacity to communicate widely with readers unable to be present at its author's oral teaching.³² Oral teaching could be passed on, but much less effectively than a book. Books, like letters, were designed to cross distances orally could not so effectively cross. But whereas letters usually (though not invariably) stopped at their first recipients, anyone in the first century who wrote a book such as a *bios* expected it to circulate to readers unknown to its author. That small circle to which the author might initially read it or those friends to whom he might initially give copies were merely the first step to wider circulation. Once there was a copy outside the author's possession, he would expect others to make copies for their own use and his book to have embarked on a journey into the world beyond his control. This was true even of the religious literature of a minority culture such as the Jews, probably the most obvious model for the

32. The evidence suggests that in early Christianity this function of writing (communication across space) was more important than the ability of writing to give permanence (communication over time). Few early Christian teachers seem to have felt the need to give their teaching permanence by writing it. Even where we suspect this must have been an important factor, as in the case of the book of Revelation, communication across space remains at least the ostensible occasion (Revelation was written from Patmos as a circular letter to the seven churches of Asia). It seems that the oral Gospel tradition continued vigorously and enjoyed respect long after the production of written Gospels.

Christian author who wrote the first Gospel. Jewish religious literature in Greek, wherever it might have been written, circulated among the communities of the western diaspora, presumably by the normal channels of personal contacts and traveling, that account for the circulation of most literature in the period.³³ Why should Mark, if Mark was the first evangelist, have written merely for the few hundred people, at most, who composed the Christian community in his own city,³⁴ when the very act of writing a book would naturally suggest the possibility of communicating with Greek-speaking Christians everywhere?

V

For the major stage of my argument for the likelihood that Gospels would have been written for general circulation we must turn to a crucial feature of the general character of the early Christian movement. The early Christian movement was not a scattering of isolated, self-sufficient communities with little or no communication between them, but quite the opposite: a network of communities with constant, close communication among themselves. In other words, the social character of early Christianity was such that the idea of writing a Gospel purely for one's own community is unlikely to have occurred to anyone.

The consensus I am challenging seems to depend on a view of an

33. For communication between the diaspora communities, see now J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan* (323 BCE-117 CE) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 418-24.

34. Stanton, "Revisiting," 12, calculates (from the size of rooms in large houses) that a single house church could have comprised no more than fifty people; similarly, J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1983), 166-67. But B. Blue, "Acts and the House Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 142-43 (cf. 175), argues for rather larger numbers (75 in a large reception hall, with the possibility of accommodating more in adjoining rooms). Since the whole church in Corinth could (presumably only occasionally) meet in the house of Gaius (Rom. 16:23), it is unlikely to have numbered more than about one hundred at that time. But in some cities there could have been several house churches, which would not have been able to meet all together in a single house.

early Christian community as a self-contained, self-sufficient, inverted group, having little contact with other Christian communities and little sense of participation in a worldwide Christian movement. Identity, issues, and concerns, it seems to be presupposed, are thoroughly local. Andrew Overman's recent book on Matthew, for example, contains no reference at all to a Christian world beyond Matthew's own community (which consists of a small group of churches). That Matthew even knew about other Christian communities, still less that his community had any kinds of relationships with them, is never suggested, despite the notably universal thrust of the Gospel itself, with its strong indications of a worldwide Christian mission.³⁵ Overman discusses the Matthean community's theological and social self-understanding as though the Matthean community were the only Christian community in existence. Even the role of Peter is discussed as though it related solely to the Matthean community,³⁶ despite the fact that the key Petrine passage (Matt. 16:17-19) is notable for using the word ἐκκλησία in the singular to refer to the universal church, rather than with its more common reference to a local Christian community. Such a picture of isolated and inward-looking parochialism is both generated by and then serves to reinforce the notion that a Gospel has only a particular community in view. But it is in serious conflict with all the real evidence we have about the early Christian movement. Therefore, in this section of the chapter, I shall indicate, by sampling only, the large amount of relevant evidence we have in the sources — information that deserves precedence over tenuous infer-

35. It is difficult to be sure what the brief discussion of Matthew 28:18-20 in Overman, *Matthew's Gospel*, 121-22, is meant precisely to imply. Apparently, the Matthean community as a whole understands itself to be engaged in mission to the Gentile world, but whether missionaries travel from the Matthean community to evangelize Gentiles in other places is left unclear. But, in any case, it is taken entirely for granted that this passage describes the mission of the Matthean community alone, not a mission in which the early Christian movement throughout the world is engaged. Matthew's implied readers are supposed to think only of themselves and the world, not of other Christian communities, nor of themselves as part of a worldwide Christian movement.

36. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel*, 136-40.

ences drawn from the Gospel texts on the basis of an already assumed model.

The first thing this information tells us is that mobility and communication in the first-century Roman world were exceptionally high.³⁷ Unprecedentedly good roads and unprecedentedly safe travel by both land and sea made the Mediterranean world of this time more closely interconnected than any large area of the ancient world had ever been. People traveled on business as merchants, traders, and bankers, on pilgrimage to religious festivals, in search of health and healing at the healing shrines and spas, to consult the oracles which flourished in this period, to attend the pan-Hellenic games and the various lesser versions of these all over the empire, as soldiers in the legions, as government personnel of many kinds, and even on vacation and as sightseers. In the forum of Rome, many cities maintained their own offices to assist their citizens who were doing business there or visiting the metropolis.³⁸ It was certainly not only the wealthy who traveled. Quite ordinary people traveled to healing shrines, religious festivals, and games. Slaves and servants frequently accompanied their masters on journeys. Runaway slaves, freed slaves returning home, people in search of work, soldiers and sailors and brigands all traveled. Travel was usually by foot and so was cheap. Therefore people quite typical of the members of the early Christian churches regularly traveled. Those who did not, if they lived in the cities, would constantly be meeting people passing through or arriving from elsewhere.

So the context in which the early Christian movement developed was not conducive to parochialism; quite the opposite. Frequent contact between the churches scattered across the empire was natural in such a society, but in addition to Christian participation in the ordinary mobility of this society,³⁹ much communication was deliberately fostered between the churches, as we shall see shortly.

37. For this paragraph, see especially L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974).

38. Casson, *Travel*, 129.

39. For example, Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) was presumably traveling to Rome from her home in Cenchrea on business of her own and therefore undertook to convey Paul's letter to the Roman Christians; Onesimus, a runaway slave from Colossae, met Paul in Rome or Ephesus (Philemon).

For, second, the evidence of early Christian literature (not least the Gospels) is that the early Christian movement had a strong sense of itself as a worldwide movement. For Jewish Christians who made up most of the early Christian leadership, this must have come naturally, since the communities of the Jewish diaspora were used to understanding themselves in terms of their common membership of a people scattered across the world. But Gentile converts were inculcated as Christians into a new social identity that was certainly not purely local. Paul's letters, for example, are constantly relating the churches he addresses to other churches and to the Christian movement as a whole (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2), even to the churches of Judea (1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Cor. 16:3) and other non-Pauline churches (cf. 1 Cor. 9:5). The language of fictive kinship encouraged converts to replace their natural ties of family loyalty with new Christian ties that encompassed brothers and sisters throughout the world. Such ties could be important. A small minority group experiencing alienation and opposition in its immediate social context could compensate for its precarious minority position locally by a sense of solidarity with fellow-believers elsewhere and a sense of being part of a worldwide movement destined to become the worldwide kingdom of God. 1 Peter, for example, encourages its readers by reminding them that "your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering" (5:9), while the book of Revelation enables potential martyrs to see themselves as belonging to an innumerable company drawn from every nation on earth (7:9-14). One wonders why it is that social-scientific study of the New Testament has not given an account of the functions that belonging to a worldwide movement performed for early Christians, instead of constructing such artificially isolated communities as Overman's Marthean community.

Third, we should note that most of the Christian leaders of whom we know in the New Testament period *moved around*.⁴⁰ Of course, Paul and those missionary colleagues who traveled with him or in close connection with his own travels (Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, and others) were constantly on the move, normally staying only weeks or months

40. On mobility in early Christianity and, in relation to it, the importance of hospitality, see A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 64-68.

at a time in one place. Others may not have been so constantly mobile, but most are to be found in several different locations at different times in their careers. This is true of Peter,⁴¹ Barnabas,⁴² Mark,⁴³ Silas/Silas,⁴⁴ Apollos,⁴⁵ Philip the evangelist⁴⁶ and his prophet daughters,⁴⁷ Aquila and Priscilla,⁴⁸ Andronicus and Junia,⁴⁹ Agabus,⁵⁰ and the brothers of the Lord.⁵¹ Even the unknown author to the Hebrews,

41. Jerusalem (Acts 1:8; 11–12; 15; Gal. 1:18; 2:9); Samaria (Acts 8:14–25); Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea (Acts 8:32–10:48); Antioch (Gal. 2:11); Corinth? (1 Cor. 1:12); Rome (1 Pet. 5:13); and cf. 1 Cor. 9:5.

42. Jerusalem (Acts 4:36–37; 9:27; 11:22); Antioch (Acts 11:22–26); Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–10; Acts 11:30; 12:25); Antioch (Acts 12:25–13:2); with Paul on the “first missionary journey” (Acts 13–14; cf. 1 Cor. 9:6); Antioch (Gal. 2:13; Acts 14:26–15:2); Jerusalem (Acts 15:4–22); Antioch (Acts 15:22, 30–39); Cyprus (Acts 15:39).

43. Jerusalem (Acts 12:12); Antioch (Acts 12:25); Cyprus (Acts 13:5); Pamphylia (Acts 13:13); Jerusalem (Acts 13:13); Antioch (Acts 15:37–38); Cyprus (Acts 15:39); Rome (1 Pet. 5:13; ? Philem. 24; ? Col. 4:10); Colossae? (Col. 4:10).

44. Jerusalem (Acts 15:22, 33); Antioch (Acts 15:30–32, 40); traveling with Paul from Antioch to Berea (Acts 15:40–17:15; 1 Thess. 2:2); Corinth (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1); Rome (1 Pet. 5:12).

45. Alexandria (Acts 18:24); Ephesus (Acts 18:24–26); Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6; Acts 18:27–19:1); Ephesus? (1 Cor. 16:12).

46. Jerusalem (Acts 6:5); Samaria (Acts 8:5–13); coastal plain of Palestine (Acts 8:26–40); Caesarea (Acts 8:40; 21:8); Hierapolis (Polycrates *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 5.24.2; Gaius *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 3.31.4).

47. Caesarea (Acts 21:9); Hierapolis (Papias *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 3.39.9; Polycrates *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 5.24.2; Gaius *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 3.31.4) and Ephesus (Polycrates *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 5.24.2).

48. Rome (Acts 18:2); Corinth (Acts 18:2–3); Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19; Acts 18:18–19, 26; cf. Rom. 16:4; 2 Tim. 4:19); Rome (Rom. 16:3–5).

49. Romans 16:7: Since they were “in Christ” before Paul they were Palestinian Jewish Christians, probably members of the Jerusalem church; somewhere (Antioch?) they were in prison together with Paul; and were then in Rome.

50. Jerusalem (Acts 11:27; 21:10); Antioch (Acts 11:27–28); Caesarea (Acts 21:10–11).

51. 1 Corinthians 9:5 shows that the brothers of the Lord were traveling missionaries. On the relatives of Jesus as traveling missionaries, see further R. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 57–70.

writing from one location, expects to be visiting his addressees in another (13:23). The prophet John, author of Revelation, must have been personally acquainted with the seven churches to which he writes. A considerable number of the prominent members of the church of Rome whom Paul greeted by name in Romans 16⁵² were people he had come to know in the course of his missionary travels in the eastern Mediterranean who had subsequently moved to Rome.⁵³

Further details of a few of these named persons will reinforce the point. John Mark, a member of a Cypriot Jewish family settled in Jerusalem and a member of the early Jerusalem church, was then in Antioch, accompanied his cousin Barnabas and Paul on their missionary journey as far as Pamphylia, later accompanied Barnabas to Cyprus, and is finally heard of in Rome, if Philemon was written from Rome, where 1 Peter also places him. Philip the evangelist, a member of the Jerusalem church, then a traveling missionary in Palestine, settled in Caesarea Maritima with his prophet daughters, and finally (according to reliable second-century tradition) in Hierapolis in Asia Minor with two of the daughters, while a third ended her days in Ephesus. Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who lived in Rome (though Aquila was originally from Pontus) until Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius, were apparently already Christians when Paul first met them in Corinth, whence they moved to Ephesus, where the church met in their house, but later returned to Rome. There is no reason to suppose that such movements were untypical of the Christian leaders of the first generation.

52. Although D. Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 69–73, still maintains the suggestion that Romans 16 was originally addressed to Ephesus (in his version of this suggestion, Romans 16 is a cover note added by Paul when he sent a copy of his letter to the Romans to Ephesus), most recent scholarship accepts that the church in Rome is addressed in this chapter: cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38 (Dallas: Word, 1988), 884–85.

53. Not all of those named need have been personally known to Paul; some could have been known to him by reputation. But, in addition to Aquila and Priscilla, Andronicus and Junia, the following must fall into the category of people Paul had known before they moved to Rome: Epaphroditus, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Persis, and Rufus and his mother.

The importance of this point is that these are the people we should take as models for the kind of person who might have written a Gospel. Why do scholars so readily assume that the author of a Gospel would be someone who had spent all his Christian life attached to the same Christian community, when the real evidence we have about early Christian leaders suggests that he would more likely be someone who had spent much time traveling around various churches or someone who had spent some time established as a teacher in more than one church? In that case, his own experience of the Christian movement could well be far from parochial. And since the writing of a Gospel could well have taken several years, why should it be assumed that even the writing of a Gospel took place in the context only of one Christian community? Matthew, for example, may have lived in several very different and geographically distant Christian communities over the course of the years in which he compiled his Gospel. There is nothing to warrant us ignoring this possibility and much to suggest that theories about the Gospels need to allow for it.

Admittedly, the leaders just mentioned all belonged to the first Christian generation, and specific information about named Christian leaders from the later part of the first century is much more scarce. But there is no reason at all to suppose that Christian leaders became more static as the century grew old. Itinerant teachers traveling from one church to another were still common up to the end of the century: we find them in Revelation (2:2), the Johannine letters (2 John 10-11; 3 John 3-8) and the Didache (11:1-6). Moreover, in order to complete this picture of early Christian leaders as people whose experience and therefore vision of the church was far from confined to their own parochial patch, it is worth glancing into the second century, because, if we can establish an overall pattern of mobility in Christian leaders which is continuous from our earliest evidence in the time of Paul through to the late second century, thus encompassing the period in which the Gospels were written, the case will be the stronger. From the end of the first century onwards the leadership of traveling missionaries, teachers, and prophets probably gave way gradually to the leadership of local bishops. But it should be noticed that these bishops themselves, despite their attachment to local churches, maintained the habit of

traveling and visiting other communities. For example, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, visited Rome,⁵⁴ and in his letter to the Philipppians (13:1) envisages traveling to Syrian Antioch, should he be able to get away. Abercius, bishop of Hierapolis, who narrated his travels on his tombstone, traveled both west to Rome and east to Syria and across the Euphrates to Nisibis, finding a welcome everywhere, he says, from Christians (lines 7-12).⁵⁵ Melito, bishop of Sardis traveled to Palestine.⁵⁶ Another much-traveled second-century Christian was Hegesippus, probably a native of Palestine, who in the middle of the century recorded Palestinian Jewish Christian traditions, and who enjoyed the hospitality of the church of Corinth during what must have been a detour on his way to Rome, where he compiled a list of the bishops.⁵⁷ Other prominent second-century teachers seem, almost as a rule, to have taught for a time in more than one major Christian center: Justin Martyr, a native of Samaria, lived in both Ephesus and Rome; Tatian, who came from east Syria beyond the Euphrates, taught in Rome and then in Antioch before returning to his birthplace; the Gnostic teacher Valentinus taught in Alexandria, then in Rome; Basilides came to Alexandria from Antioch; Marcion came to Rome from his native Pontus.⁵⁸

It seems that leaders who moved from church to church, to a greater or lesser extent, are a constant feature of the early Christian movement in the first century and a half of its existence. We must therefore reckon very seriously with the chances that some, if not all, of the evangelists were people whose own experience was far from limited to a single Christian community or even to the churches of a particular geographical region. Such a person would not naturally confine his attention, when composing a Gospel, to the local needs and problems of a single, homogeneous community but could well have in

54. Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 3.3.4.

55. J. Quasten, *Parrology* (Utrecht and Brussels: Spectrum, 1950), 1:172.

56. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.13-14.

57. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.22.2-3.

58. Other examples of the mobility of bishops and teachers in the second century and later are in A. Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. Moffatt (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 1:463-66.

view the variety of different contexts he had experienced in several churches he knew well. His own experience could give him the means of writing relevantly for a wide variety of churches in which his Gospel might be read, were it to circulate generally around the churches of the late-first-century Roman world.

Fourth, another feature of the early Christian movement that we can establish as a continuous practice from the time of Paul to the mid-second century is the sending of letters from one church to another.⁵⁹ We find, for example, the leadership of the Roman church writing a letter of pastoral concern to churches scattered over a wide area of Asia Minor (1 Peter) and another to the church of Corinth to deal with the problems and disputes in that church (1 Clement). From the early second century we have the letter of Polycarp of Smyrna to the church at Philippi, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch to six different churches. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, in the middle of the second century wrote at least seven letters to various churches, which Eusebius knew as a collection⁶⁰ but which are no longer extant. The work known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is actually a letter from the church of Smyrna to, in the first instance, the church of Philomelium in Phrygia, which had asked for it, though it was intended also to circulate to other churches. These letters which have survived or which at least survived until Eusebius's time are only the tip of an iceberg. They are the ones that proved of lasting value; many more ephemeral letters must have perished, as we know that even some of Paul's did.

Letters establish more than literary connections between churches. Letters imply messengers. The messenger would either be a member of the sending church who was in any case traveling through or near the church addressed, or a member of the sending church who traveled specifically to carry the letter. Messengers stayed in the homes of members of the church, met with the whole church for worship, conveyed orally news not included in the letter, received news to take back home,

59. For later examples of the exchange of letters between churches, see Harnack, *Expansion*, 466-67.

60. *Hist. eccl.* 4.23.1-13. The collection Eusebius knew also included a letter to an individual: Chrysophora.

and surely forged warm personal contacts with their hosts. Because of the role of messengers, a letter is merely the formal, surviving element in a two-way communication with wider oral and personal dimensions.⁶¹ Messengers were one way in which personal links between churches were created, which must have given even the most untraveled Christian a strong sense of participation in something much broader than his or her local church. But messengers carrying letters are only one example of the kind of informal contact that must have been constantly created by members of one church, traveling for all kinds of reasons, passing through and enjoying the hospitality and fellowship of other churches. (Of course, they also clashed and quarreled, as we shall notice shortly.)

Fifth, we have concrete evidence for close contacts between churches in the period around or soon after the writing of the Gospels. I will cite just three examples.

(1) The famous fragment of Papias's prologue to his lost work⁶² affords us one glimpse of what happened. Though writing in the early second century, Papias was recalling a time in the late first century (precisely the time when Matthew, Luke, and John were being written). As a young man in Hierapolis, he had been an avid collector of oral traditions. He collected them not by traveling himself but by quizzing anyone who happened to pass through Hierapolis who had heard the teaching of personal disciples of Jesus either firsthand or secondhand.⁶³ Hierapolis is a little off the much-traveled route that ran east from Ephesus through Laodicea, and so we must suppose that Christians traveling that route sometimes turned aside specifically to visit the church at Hierapolis. (Perhaps the famous prophet daughters of Philip

61. On the role of messengers, see G. R. Llewelyn and R. A. Kearsley, "Letter-Carriers in the Early Church," in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Sydney: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1994), 7:50-57. Messengers also sometimes conveyed information without letters: examples in Llewelyn and Kearsley, "Letter-Carriers," 55.

62. *Ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3-4.

63. On the relevant point of interpretation of Papias here, see R. Bauckham, "Papias and Polycrates on the Origin of the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (1993): 60.

the evangelist, then living at Hierapolis, were the attraction.⁶⁴ Papias's evidence therefore shows how far even a Christian community not on a major communication route would be visited regularly by Christians from other churches and kept in close touch with the wider Christian movement. A more strategically located church would be correspondingly more frequently in touch with a wider circle of other churches. Ephesus, for example, was a city so much traveled through that it is no surprise that Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus in the late second century, could claim to have conversed with Christian brethren from all parts of the world.⁶⁵ The claim is wholly credible and could equally have been made by a Christian leader in any of several major churches in the right locations at any time in the first two centuries of early Christian history.

(2) The letters of Ignatius, written only two or three decades after Matthew, Luke, and John, give us a remarkably detailed picture of an active communication network among the churches of the area from Syrian Antioch to Philippi, as well as between these churches and Rome. They record how, in the period when Ignatius was traveling from Syrian Antioch to Italy, letters, delegates, and even bishops traveled back and forth between these various churches for a variety of purposes. The movements can be reconstructed as follows. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was being taken to Rome, a prisoner under guard, expecting martyrdom there. The route took him and his guards across Asia Minor. At Smyrna he was visited by emissaries from the churches at Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles, each led by its bishop, and he wrote a letter for each delegation to take back to their own community (*Eph.* 1:3; 2:1; 21:1; *Magn.* 2:1; 15:1; *Trall.* 1:1; 13:1). From Smyrna Ignatius also wrote to the church in Rome, apparently responding to news he had already received from the Roman church, and also referring to Syrian Christians who had traveled to Rome ahead of him (*Rom.* 10:2), presumably to prepare the Roman church for his arrival.

At Troas, waiting to embark on the sea journey to Neapolis,

64. At least two of them were then living in Hierapolis: Polycrates *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 5.24.2.

65. Polycrates *ap. Eusebius Hist. eccl.* 5.24.7.

Ignatius wrote to the church at Smyrna, which he had just visited, and to the church at Philadelphia, which two of his companions had recently visited (*Philad.* 11:1). He also wrote a personal letter to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. These letters were conveyed by Burrus, who had been delegated by the churches of Smyrna and Ephesus to accompany Ignatius (*Philad.* 11:2; *Smyrn.* 12:1). While at Troas Ignatius had received news from Antioch, to the effect that the church there, which had been troubled either by persecution or by internal disputes (it is not clear which), was now at peace (*Philad.* 10:1; *Pol.* 7:1). Ignatius was therefore anxious that all the churches of the area should send messengers with letters to Antioch to congratulate the Antiochene Christians. His letter to the Philadelphian Christians tells them to send a deacon, pointing out that churches nearer to Antioch had already sent bishops or presbyters or deacons (*Philad.* 10:1-2). His letter to the Smyrnean Christians tells them to send someone to Antioch with a letter (*Smyrn.* 11:2-3). In his letter to Polycarp, he not only asks him to convene a meeting of the church to appoint someone really suitable for this task (*Pol.* 7:2), he also explains that he is having to leave Troas before he has had time to write to the other churches this side of Antioch (meaning, probably, those in Asia Minor). So Polycarp is deputed to do this, telling them all to send, if possible, messengers to Antioch, or at least a letter by the hand of the messengers from Smyrna (*Pol.* 8:1).

Finally, when Ignatius passed through Philippi, he asked the church there also to communicate with Antioch. Since Philippi was a considerable journey from Antioch, the Philippians decided to send their messenger only as far as Smyrna and to entrust their letter to the Smyrnean messenger. Polycarp of Smyrna, writing back to the Philippians, assures them this will be done, and expects himself to be going to Antioch, if only he can get away (*Polycarp Phil.* 13:1).

Thus, in the period it took Ignatius and his guards to travel from Antioch to Italy, two delegations of Christians had left for Rome (one from Antioch, one from Troas or Ephesus), major delegations had traveled from Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles to Smyrna, some Ephesian Christians had traveled on to Troas, messengers had gone from Troas to Philadelphia and to Smyrna, and from Philippi to Smyrna and back, and many of these churches had sent delegations, some including their

bishops, to Antioch. Probably delegations and letters would also have reached Antioch for the same purpose from churches to the south and east of Antioch. The communication network is even more vigorous and complex than it had been when Paul and his missionary colleagues traveled the area.

An indication of the way this network made the circulation of literature easy and natural is also provided by these events. When the Philippian Christians sent their messenger to Smyrna, they asked Polycarp to send them copies of any letters of Ignatius that the church at Smyrna had received from him, together with copies of any other letters of Ignatius the church at Smyrna had. Polycarp did this (Polycarp *Phil.* 13:2). In other words, already the church at Smyrna had copies of letters of Ignatius to other churches, as well as to themselves, and already they were making copies of all these letters to send to another, rather more distant church. If letters of Ignatius circulated so quickly, we must surely conclude that the Gospels written in the preceding few decades would have circulated around the churches just as rapidly.

(3) Another insight into the way that Christian literature circulated comes from the *Shepherd of Hermas*. The Roman Christian prophet Hermas in his apocalyptic visions tells how the visionary figure, an elderly woman, who disclosed the revelations to him told him to write them in a book, which he and the elders were to read to the Roman church. But he was also to make two copies. One was for Grapte, who would use it to instruct the widows and orphans. Evidently Grapte was in charge of the church's charitable work. The other copy was for Clement, who "will send it to the cities abroad, because this is his job" (*Vis.* 2:4:3).⁶⁶ Clement was the Roman church's secretary responsible for communications with other churches. This apparently included having multiple copies made of Christian literature produced in Rome and sending the copies out by messengers to other churches. (If he sent to churches in major centers, they would presumably take care of further, more local distribution.) Clement also sent out letters to particular churches, as we know from the fact that so-called 1 Clement, the letter from the church in Rome to the church

66. πένψει οὖν Κλήμης εἰς τὰς ἑξὼ πόλεις, ἐκείνῳ γὰρ ἐπιτέφραται.

in Corinth, is attributed to him. Evidently Clement's job of sending out literature to churches abroad was already his job in the late first century when 1 Clement was written. Quite probably therefore Herma's *Visions* were also written at that time. So Herma provides us with concrete information, from the very period in which Matthew, Luke, and John were being written, about the way newly written Christian literature was widely and very deliberately circulated around the churches.

Sixth, and finally, the evidence for conflict and diversity in early Christianity supports my picture of the early Christian movement as a network of communities in constant communication. This picture should not be misunderstood as though it portrayed the Christian movement as entirely harmonious and homogeneous. It does not require the evidence for conflict and diversity to be played down. On the contrary, it is clear that this network of communication among the early Christian churches was a vehicle for conflict and disagreement, as well as for fellowship and support. All the evidence we have for rivalry between Christian teachers or conflict between different versions of the Christian message, from Paul's letters through to Revelation and the letters of Ignatius, shows us that conflict operating across the network of communication I have depicted. Teachers of one version of Christianity do not keep to a small patch of like-minded churches. On the contrary, itinerant teachers of any persuasion are always liable to turn up in any church. Congregations divide. Leaders from elsewhere write to support one faction or another. Much as some leaders strove to get teachers of whom they disapproved excluded from churches where they had influence, clearly they constantly failed. None of this evidence for conflict and disagreement suggests that any version of Christianity formed a homogeneous little enclave of churches, out of communication with other churches and renouncing any interest or involvement with the wider Christian movement. Quite the opposite: all such evidence confirms my picture. Churches take an intense interest in conflicts happening elsewhere. Leaders and teachers actively promote their versions of the Gospel anywhere and everywhere in the Christian world. These are not the introverted communities and teachers who would produce written Gospels purely for home consumption.

In view of all this evidence that the early Christian movement was a network of communities in constant communication with each other, by messengers, letters, and movements of leaders and teachers — moreover, a network around which Christian literature circulated easily, quickly, and widely — surely the idea of writing a Gospel purely for the members of the writer's own church or even for a few neighboring churches is unlikely to have occurred to anyone. The burden of proof must lie with those who claim it did.

VI

I conclude with a number of hermeneutical observations:

First, the attempt by the current consensus in Gospels scholarship to give the so-called Matthean, Markan, Lukan, and Johannine communities a key hermeneutical role in the interpretation of the Gospels is wholly mistaken. If the Gospels do not address those communities in particular, those communities have no hermeneutical relevance. As a matter of fact, it seems very doubtful whether we can know anything worth knowing about them. If the Gospels were not written for specific communities, then the situation is quite different from that which enables us to know quite a lot about Paul's Corinthian church. Certainly it may be argued that the community in which a Gospel was written is likely to have influenced the writing of the Gospel even though it is not addressed by the Gospel. But it does not follow that we have any chance of reconstructing that community. As I have already indicated, we certainly cannot take it for granted that a Gospel was written in only one community. It is entirely possible that a Gospel was written over a period during which its author was resident for a time in each of two or more very different communities. Even apart from this possibility, we cannot take it for granted that the author of a Gospel would have been influenced by only one community context. Even if his Gospel was written within a specific Christian community, it is quite probable that he himself would have previously lived and taught in other communities. The influences on him and therefore on his Gospel would be various. In view of the extent and intensity of communication throughout the early Christian movement, even a writer of a Gospel who

had lived all his life in one Christian community would be very well aware of the Christian movement as a more-than-local phenomenon and would have all kinds of contacts, personal and literary, with many churches other than his own. Finally, the way in which a creative writer is influenced by and responds to his or her context is simply not calculable. The chances of being able to deduce from an author's work what the influences on the author were, if we have only the work to inform us, are minimal. Hence the enterprise of reconstructing an evangelist's community is, for a series of cogent reasons, doomed to failure. But, much more importantly, it is in any case of no *hermeneutical* value, since the Gospels were not addressed to or intended to be understood solely by such a community. Whatever the influences on an evangelist's work may have been, its *implied readership* is not a specific audience, large or small, but an indefinite readership: any or every church of the late first century to which his Gospel might circulate. This, not what we may or may not be able to guess about the evangelist's community, is the hermeneutically relevant fact. Thus any reader who finds the argument of this chapter convincing should cease using the terms Matthean community, Markan community, Lukan community, and Johannine community. They no longer have a useful meaning.

Second, the implication of the argument of this chapter is not just that the implied audience of the Gospels is broader than the current consensus allows. A few recent writers on the Gospels have diverged from the dominant trend in Gospels scholarship to the extent of envisaging a larger rather than a smaller implied audience.⁶⁷ The evangelist may have had in mind quite a range of churches located over a specific geographical area, or a scattered network of churches he knew. Such an argument introduces more diversity into the implied audience and rejects the kind of detailed reconstructions of very specific circumstances that have been common in discussion of the evangelists' communities. However, to modify the consensus merely to the extent of widening the audience for which an evangelist allegedly wrote is not at all the paradigm shift proposed in this chapter. In such a move it is still presupposed that an evangelist had in mind specific churches for which he wrote. In principle he could have listed the major churches

67. See especially G. N. Stanton's work, discussed in n. 29 above.

to which he expected his Gospel to circulate and which constituted his intended readership. The audience, though relatively large, is still specific. This chapter has proposed, not merely that the implied audience of a Gospel is larger than the current consensus allows, but that it is *indefinite rather than specific*. This is a difference of kind, not just of degree, from the current consensus. The evangelists, I have argued, did not write for specific churches they knew or knew about, not even for a very large number of such churches. Rather, drawing on their experience and knowledge of several or many specific churches, they wrote *for any and every church* to which their Gospels might circulate. No more than almost any other author, at their time or at most other periods, could they know which specific readers and hearers their work would reach. Thus, to ask, for example, if Luke knew whether there were any Christian churches in Gaul at the time when he wrote, and, supposing he knew there were, if he intended to address them in his Gospel, is to ask altogether the wrong sort of question. His intended audience was an *open category* — any and every church to which his Gospel might circulate — not a specified audience in which he had consciously either to include churches in Gaul or not.

Third, from what has been said so far in these hermeneutical conclusions, some readers immersed in the consensus may suppose that the effect of the argument of this chapter is to decontextualize the Gospels and to render historical context hermeneutically irrelevant. But this is not the case. The argument does not represent the Gospels as autonomous literary works floating free of any historical context. The Gospels have a historical context, but that context is not the evangelist's community. It is the early Christian movement in the late first century. We can bring to the interpretation of the Gospels everything we know about that movement and its political, social, economic, religious, and ideological contexts. This context is much less specific than the current consensus in Gospels scholarship desires, but it is no more general than the context that most literature of that period addresses, or the context that most literature of any society in any period addresses. Literature addressing a specific community in a specific locality is very rare, but to claim that most authors address wider contexts than this does not decontextualize their work.

However, fourth, it is certainly true that the argument of this chapter smooths the hermeneutical path from the way the Gospels addressed their first readers — an open category of readers/hearers in any late-first-century Christian church to which the Gospels might circulate — to the way the Gospels have been read ever since. This was not the intention with which the argument was developed, but it is the consequence of the argument. As I remarked earlier in the chapter, no attentive reader can miss the hermeneutical relevance of the church at Corinth to the interpretation of 1 Corinthians. But all readers without exception before the mid-twentieth century missed the (alleged) hermeneutical relevance of the Matthean community to the interpretation of Matthew. Historical scholarship does not, after all, require us to suppose that they were all mistaken.

Fifth, the argument of this chapter does not require us to underestimate the diversity of the Gospels. It simply denies what the consensus assumes: that this diversity requires a diversity of readers. The highly distinctive nature of the Fourth Gospel, for example, does not imply that its intended readers were a highly distinctive branch of early Christianity, different from the readership of other Gospels. It implies only that its author (or authors) wished to propagate his own distinctive theological rendering of the Gospel story among whatever readers it might reach. The argument of this chapter leaves open many questions about the diversity of the Gospels. That the evangelists had different understandings of Jesus and his story, and made different judgments about the problems and priorities of being Christians in the late-first-century world, is clear. Whether a later evangelist who knew that his Gospel would be read by readers who already knew an earlier Gospel expected his Gospel to supplement or to supplant the earlier is left by my argument entirely open. Whether the relationships between the Gospels as they first circulated around the churches were understood as irenic or polemical, complementary or competitive, is again left entirely open. How far their divergent approaches are indeed complementary or contradictory is also left entirely open by the argument of this chapter and remains a key hermeneutical issue in the interpretation of the Gospels. The argument of this chapter merely excludes, as a factor in accounting for or understanding the diversity of the Gospels, the hypothesis that each was written

for a different community. Many other ways of accounting for and understanding the diversity of the Gospels remain.

Sixth, it is appropriate to conclude by pointing out that the mistake made by the consensus view which this chapter has attacked derives from a misplaced desire for historical specificity. It has behind it that tremendous drive towards historical specificity which has fueled a considerable part of the whole enterprise of modern biblical scholarship. The desire is to define the historical meaning of the text as specifically as possible by defining its historical context as closely as possible. Just as we know that we have understood 1 Corinthians 8-10 better when we have studied pagan sacrificial meals in Corinth, so we think we shall know more precisely what Luke's teaching on wealth and poverty means if only we can define just where the dozen rich people in Luke's community belonged in the social hierarchy and exactly how they were actually treating the poor.

This is a hermeneutical mistake, but the mistake does not consist in thinking historical context relevant. It lies in failing to see that texts vary in the extent to which they are context-specific. Some texts, which Umberto Eco calls "closed texts," define their implied reader very closely and also have a determinate meaning that depends on knowing what the implied reader is supposed to know. If one does not know this, one can misunderstand badly. If we knew nothing at all about idol-meat in Corinth, we might well mistake Paul's meaning quite seriously. But other texts, which Eco calls "open texts," leave their implied readership more open and consequently leave their meaning more open to their real readers' participation in producing meaning.⁶⁸ The Gospels are relatively open texts, though not as open as some kinds of text (a lyric poem, for example). 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 Matthew would have minded at all. To think we do not know what Matthew meant unless we can pin down what sort of enemies his community had is trying to read an open text as a closed one.

68. U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 8-10.

The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation¹

MICHAEL B. THOMPSON

This essay seeks to explore aspects of communication within the network of the first Christians that existed between 30 and 70 A.D. Scholars have already analyzed the local networks reflected in the New Testament in some respects, either in general studies of Christian community, or with regard to particular aspects, such as Paul's co-workers. Some have concentrated on the social rank and status of early Christians,² and others are now starting to apply the sociological discipline of "network analysis" to the New Testament to explore the range and nature of *relations* between believers.³ I will focus on the subject

1. A revised and adapted version of the Tyndale New Testament Lecture, given at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on July 2, 1996. I wish to thank one of my students, Jeremy Brooks, whose assistance in helping me calculate travel times was invaluable.

2. E.g. W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

3. L. M. White, ed., *Semeia* 56: *Social Networks in the Early Christian Environment: Issues and Methods for Social History* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). Although there are different schemes for analyzing social networks, R. F. Hock cites (1) four morphological characteristics of networks: anchorage (identification