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Chapter 6

GOSPEL AUDIENCES: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Adele Reinhartz

It is a truism that the methods and points of consensus of one academic generation often recede in importance or disappear entirely by the time the next generation reaches maturity. These changes often constitute paradigm shifts, whereby new ideas or discoveries take hold and transform the methods, norms and practices of a particular discipline. In the field of New Testament studies, William Wrede's exposition of the 'messianic secret' in Mark marked one such shift, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls another.

In his 1998 edited volume, *The Gospels for all Christians*, Richard Bauckham set out to create one such paradigm shift, with regard to the question of Gospel audiences.¹ In the introduction to this book, Bauckham noted that over the last fifty years, Gospel scholarship has been bound by a consensus that each of the canonical Gospels was written for a specific church or group of churches. Yet little effort has been made to support this consensus: 'It is a remarkable feature of the history of New Testament scholarship in this century that this consensus about the original intended audiences of the Gospels has come about without any substantial argument.'² In *The Gospels for All Christians*, Bauckham aimed to dethrone the consensus by arguing that the Gospels were not written for localized groups but were intended for general circulation within the early Christian world; the evangelists envisaged the broadest possible potential audience: any and every Christian in the

1. Richard Bauckham, 'Response to Philip Esler', *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 249–53 (249).

2. Richard Bauckham, 'Introduction', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 1. All other references to Bauckham's introduction and first chapter, 'For Whom were the Gospels Written?' are included within the text.

late-first-century Roman Empire (1). Bauckham claimed that this new understanding of Gospel audiences was more historically accurate than the consensus position, and predicted that it would have a profound, even seismic, impact on New Testament studies: 'The direction of much current work on the Gospels will have to change and much work will need to be done again from a quite new perspective' (2). In short, the claim that the Gospels were intended for 'all Christians' would constitute a paradigm shift in the field and become the new consensus for the coming decades.

Bauckham's challenge to the consensus position was welcomed by at least some prominent New Testament scholars. Peter Stuhlmacher, whose words appear on the back cover along with those of D. A. Carson and John Goldingay, called for the early acceptance of Bauckham's thesis, which 'is immediately obvious exegetically'. Others were less enthusiastic, and a number, such as Philip Esler, Margaret Mitchell, David Sim, and Joel Marcus, provided detailed criticisms of the hypothesis that also served to bolster the consensus opinion and thereby to counter Bauckham's contention concerning the lack of argumentation for the view that the Gospels were written in the first instance for specific communities.³

Ten years after the publication of *The Gospels for All Christians*, it would appear that the paradigm shift for which Bauckham argued has not occurred, at least, not yet.⁴ While Bauckham's work has been

3. Criticisms of Bauckham's hypothesis were articulated by a number of scholars, including Philip F. Esler, 'Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham's *Gospels for All Christians*', *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 235–48; Margaret M. Mitchell, 'Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim That "the Gospels Were Written for All Christians"', *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 36–79; David C. Sim, 'The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham', *JSNT* 84 (2001), pp. 3–27. Joel Marcus, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 25–28. For detailed responses and counter-arguments, see Richard Bauckham, 'Response to Philip Esler'; Mike Bird, 'Bauckham's *the Gospel for All Christians* Revisited', *EJT* 15 (2006), pp. 5–13; Edward W. Klink III, 'The Gospel Community Debate: State of the Question', *CBR* 3 (2004), pp. 60–85; Richard Bauckham, 'Letter to Margaret Mitchell Responding to Her Paper, "Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim That the Gospels Were Written for All Christians"' (SBL 2003) [Internet] (2004 [cited 24 August 2008]; available from <http://www.ntgateway.com/gospels/bauckham2.pdf>).

4. As quoted on the back cover of *The Gospels for All Christians*. To date, the only detailed study that takes Bauckham's hypothesis as its starting point is Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). This book is a revision of Klink's doctoral dissertation, undertaken at the University of St. Andrew's under Bauckham's supervision in 2002–2005.

discussed widely and has had some impact, the many new studies of Gospel audiences indicate that the consensus position still reigns.⁵

Perhaps the lukewarm reception of the hypothesis is merely a function of the academic tendency towards conservatism. According to Thomas Kuhn, whose *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is the classic work on the role of paradigms and paradigm shifts, scientific revolutions are often met with skepticism and outright rejection by the scholarly community, until enough scholars 'convert' or retire.⁶

My aim in these pages is not to weigh in on one side or the other of what is already a well-worn debate.⁷ Rather, I will make three interrelated points. First, Bauckham's arguments in favor of the 'Gospels for all Christians' are inconclusive: they neither undermine the hypothesis that the Gospels are addressed to specific communities nor support his own contention that the Gospels are addressed to 'all Christians'. Second, even if correct, Bauckham's hypothesis is of less consequence to the historical study of the Gospels than he and others have asserted. Third, Bauckham's position, far from marking a paradigm shift, is in fact a variation of the consensus position that he is endeavoring to depose.

Paradigms and Paradigm Shifts

Paradigms are sets of beliefs – overarching conceptual frameworks – that define academic disciplines, the questions that are considered important, and the acceptable approaches for addressing them.⁸ Academic disciplines periodically witness scientific revolutions – paradigm shifts – whereby an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by a new paradigm. This new paradigm is incompatible with the old paradigm, thereby forcing

5. One example is Andrew Lincoln's major commentary on the Gospel of John, which does not engage with Bauckham's hypothesis but rather presents and defends the consensus position that the Gospel reflects the Johannine Christians' experience of expulsion from the synagogue. Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTS 4; New York: Hendrickson/Continuum, 2005), pp. 89–92. See also Paul Foster, *Community, Law, and Mission in Matthew's Gospel* (WUNT 2.177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) and Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 47.

6. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edn, 1996), pp. 7, 158. See also the useful outline and study guide prepared by Professor Frank Pajares, Emory University <http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/Kuhn.html>.

7. Adele Reinhartz, 'Reading History in the Fourth Gospel: A Response to J. L. Martyn,' in Tom Thatcher (ed.), *'What You Have Heard From the Beginning': The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), pp. 191–94.

8. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 4

scholars to choose between one or the other.⁹ The acceptance of a new paradigm requires the rejection of the older paradigm.¹⁰

A paradigm shift is revolutionary in the sense that it provides a new set of fundamental beliefs and principles that change the way that scholars look at their field, and therefore require the rethinking of accepted theories, reconstructions, and even methods.¹¹ Paradigm changes can occur due to the discovery of new information (e.g. the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi texts), the application of a new method (e.g. reader-response criticism), or the invention of a new theory (e.g. source, form, and redaction criticisms). It is the latter – the invention of a new theory – that corresponds best to Bauckham's proposal.

Often the introduction of a novel theory comes about as a consequence of dissatisfaction with the reigning paradigm. While a new paradigm may initially have only a few adherents, or 'converts', over time the number and strength of the persuasive arguments in its favor will increase, the number of books and articles based on the new paradigm will increase, and its possibilities will be explored. There is thus a moment in time when there is a decision that must be made: 'which paradigm should in the future guide research on problems many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely'.¹²

For All Christians?

Bauckham offers four interrelated arguments for his theory that the Gospels were written not for a specific, narrowly defined audience but for the early church at large. First, and most important, is the argument from genre. The Gospels, unlike the Pauline epistles, are not topical and situational missives, but *bioi*, biographical works, albeit in the ancient celebratory sense rather than the modern analytical sense. As *bioi*, the Gospels' fundamental purpose was to convey Jesus' life and words, not address the specific issues of particular communities. While these *bioi* may have been shaped to some extent by the views of their authors and the desire to be relevant to their post-Easter audiences, they would have been 'pitched in relatively broad terms for any competent reader' (28).

Two, the Gospels are written documents. As such, they were intended to transmit ideas and information to a distant audience. Had they been intended for a localized audience it would not have been necessary to write them down (30).

9. Ibid., p. 92

10. Ibid., p. 95

11. Ibid., p. 85.

12. Ibid., pp. 156–58.

Third, the earliest Christians constituted a widespread movement characterized by a strong and closely knit social network rather than by isolated and insular communities. The social nature of this movement means that it would not have occurred to anyone to write a Gospel purely for one's own localized community (30).

Fourth, the existence of a well-developed network of churches facilitated high mobility. Many Christians, including perhaps the evangelists, would have traveled extensively. For this reason, the evangelists would have had an expansive sense of their mission and a broad understanding of the early movement that would have overridden the specific concerns of specific local communities (36). High mobility within this widespread but closely knit network would also have facilitated the rapid circulation of literature, thereby ensuring accessibility to documents written for any and all Christians (36, 42).

All of these basic points are either demonstrable (in the case of the biographic genre and written nature of the Gospels) or plausible (the existence of a well-developed network of churches that facilitated mobility and the rapid circulation of written documents). Yet none is decisive for the issue of Gospel audiences. In fact, each one can be used not only to support the 'all Christians' hypothesis as outlined above, but also the 'specific Christian communities' hypothesis as per the consensus position.

First, the biographical genre may certainly reflect an intention to reach a broad audience; nevertheless, genre alone does not rule out a more localized purview. The Gospels themselves sometimes make statements about their intended audiences. If we take the third evangelist at his word, it would seem that the Gospel of Luke, far from being written for 'all Christians', was intended for an audience of one: the most excellent Theophilus:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1.1-4).

On the other hand, the Fourth Evangelist clearly addresses a plural readership through his use of the second person plural:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20.30-31).

While it may be argued that the use of the second person plural can pertain to the broadest possible audience, it is often a sign that the document is intended for a highly specific group, as the Pauline epistles make amply clear (e.g. Gal 1.6 and *passim*).

Furthermore, the *bios* genre does not necessarily require a singular – biographical – intention. As John 20.30–31 indicates, the Fourth Evangelist's story of Jesus is told not merely in order to inform his audience of Jesus' life and teachings but also to persuade them of his identity as the Christ and Son of God, belief in which will assure them of eternal life. The possibility of multiple intentions suggests that Gospels may have been written with both general (biographical) intentions as well as more specific, localized concerns.

Second, the fact that the Gospels are written documents may indeed signal that, like the Pauline letters, they were addressed to a distant audience, but the converse may also be true. The Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran are also written documents, yet they were apparently written for the close and somewhat isolated community at Qumran.¹³ Bauckham's comparison between the Gospels and the Pauline epistles may inadvertently recognize this possibility. As Bauckham notes, the Gospels are unlike the epistles in their genre. On the other hand, the Gospels are like the epistles in that they are written rather than oral communications. Bauckham summarizes the argument as follows: '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 to be writing for *the community in which he lives*' (29). A close look at this statement, however, simply confuses the matter and in fact argues against the point that Bauckham is trying to make. Logically, the statement implies that if the Gospels were situational, like the letters of Paul, it would make no sense to see them as addressed to the communities within which they were written; after all, the letters of Paul are not addressed to the communities in which Paul was located at the time of writing. But given that the Gospels are *not* situational documents like the letters of Paul, logic demands that the second part of the statement also be false. In other words, if the Gospels were like the epistles, it would be 'odd' for them to be written to the writers' own communities. If they are *not* like the letters, then logically this 'oddness' disappears and it now becomes possible to think of them

13. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden: Brill, 2nd edn, 1996), p. xlv; Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 189.

as being addressed to the writers' own communities. But this conclusion would be contrary to Bauckham's 'all Christians' hypothesis.

Third and fourth, the social networks and high mobility that may have characterized the early Christian movement may well have encouraged the evangelists to conceive of audiences far beyond their home communities. Bauckham is certainly correct that the widespread Jewish community, encompassing Judea, Galilee, and the Diaspora, would have provided fledgling Christian communities with a role model and a concrete basis from which to develop their own extended network. And it is certainly the case that other texts from the same era, such as I and II Maccabees and other apocryphal works, were apparently written for a general audience.

On the other hand, the awareness of a broad social network does not in itself require that authors have that entire network uppermost in their minds when they are writing. The evidence from Second Temple Judaism, which formed the context within which the Jesus movement grew, demonstrably had that sense of belonging to a widespread group held together by a set of common practices and beliefs.¹⁴ Yet this allegiance would not have prevented authors from writing narrative works for specific audiences. The phenomenon of Bible translation, and the narratives written to support that endeavor, such as *The Letter of Aristeas*, point to profound differences among distinct communities that nevertheless saw themselves as part of a single worldwide entity. Philo of Alexandria traveled quite extensively, yet wrote many of his treatises for his own community in Alexandria.¹⁵ Nor does the fact that the Gospels quickly gained currency throughout the general church mean that they were written for that general church. As Bauckham himself acknowledges, the Pauline letters quickly gained currency, yet they were patently written for specific communities (27). Their situational quality did not prevent them from being perceived and accepted as applicable to a much broader audience.

While it is true, therefore, that the consensus position has sometimes lacked in support from its proponents, Bauckham's arguments do not convincingly support the alternate hypothesis. The most that can be said, in my view, is that they highlight the difficulty of drawing any firm conclusions regarding the intended audiences of the Gospels. In itself,

14. Note Wayne O. McCready and Adele Reinhartz, *Common Judaism Explored: Second Temple Judaism in Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia PA: Trinity Press International, 1992).

15. Peder Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (Leiden, Brill, 1997; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

this point neither undermines nor vindicates the consensus position; it merely points to the intractability of the Gospel audience(s) question.

Even some who are favorably inclined towards Bauckham's hypothesis seem to be aware that his arguments can run in both directions. *The Gospels for All Christians* contains several essays by other British scholars who 'found that the thesis he presented converged with the direction their own thought had been taking' (3). These essays 'presuppose the argument presented in the first chapter and explore in more detail particular areas of discussion which that argument opens up and develop further implications of the argument' (4). But in at least three cases, the articles, even if indirectly, acknowledge the inconclusive nature of the arguments that Bauckham presents.

In his essay 'The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation', Michael Thompson suggests that 'it is ... less likely that the gospels were produced for a select few, and more likely that they were written with an eye to their dissemination'. He also notes, however, that

Unless a community wanted their gospel traditions to be kept secret in Gnostic fashion, we would expect a fairly wide and rapid dissemination of *at least* the knowledge of the existence of their written texts, if not the texts themselves.¹⁶

This statement recognizes that there is no basis on which to know whether the documents written in one locale would easily have traveled to other locales, though it is plausible that knowledge of their existence would have traveled.

In his chapter, 'Can we identify the Gospel Audiences?' Stephen Barton cautions: 'Nor should it be forgotten that the [fourth] evangelist's own testimony to the purpose of his Gospel (20:30-31) resists any simple identification of his intended audience as one community or many, believers or unbelievers.'¹⁷ While this statement is intended as a critique of Wayne Meeks's view that the Fourth Gospel was written for a specific and rather isolated community, it also acknowledges implicitly that Bauckham's hypothesis of a broad and general audience for the Gospel of John is also difficult to defend.¹⁸

Loveday Alexander's chapter, 'Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels', expresses support for Bauckham's contention

16. Michael B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation', in Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians*, p. 70.

17. Stephen C. Barton, 'Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?' in Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians*, p. 93.

18. Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 44-72.

'that the writing down of the Gospoels itself implies the crossing of an invisible boundary between the implicitly limited audience of an oral performance and the wider audience that can be reached by a written text' (100). She too, however, injects a note of caution: 'But the messiness of the process suggests that we should be careful about painting the divide in too rigid terms. [We should be] ... wary of seeing the process in terms of a simple dichotomy: oral = specific audience; written = general audience.'¹⁹ It is possible that

The oral teaching that lies behind the written texts was itself perhaps more generally conceived 'for all Christians' than we have been accustomed to think – or, to put it another way, that the communication networks between Christian congregations had an effect on the way teaching was structured and expressed even at the oral level.²⁰

On the other hand, 'though a written text could travel (as the letters do), it could equally be prized as something that could *stay* in a particular congregation when the teacher whose tradition it embodied moved on',²¹

The inconclusive nature of Bauckham's arguments therefore suggests that the 'all Christians' hypothesis does not constitute a new paradigm that will inform all subsequent Gospels scholarship.

Impact on the Historical Study of Early Christianity

As Kuhn noted, a paradigm shift requires a radical rethinking of many received truths and the opportunity to look at problems from a new perspective. In keeping with his conviction that the 'all Christians' hypothesis constitutes a paradigm shift, Bauckham states that the direction of much current work will have to change once it is recognized that the Gospels were written for a broad and general audience rather than a set of different and highly specific communities. After his description of the main arguments in favor of his position, Bauckham briefly discusses the hermeneutical implications of his position. The most obvious implication is that, if Bauckham is correct, scholars should immediately cease and desist from their search for Gospel communities, thereby correcting the 'misplaced desire for historical specificity' (48) that has characterized and indeed has led to the consensus position.

19. Loveday Alexander, 'Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels', in Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians*, p. 100.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

21. *Ibid.*

For Bauckham, the attempt to 'give the so-called Matthean, Markan, Lukan, and Johannine communities a key hermeneutical role in the interpretation of the Gospels is wholly mistaken. As a matter of fact it seems very doubtful whether we can know anything worth knowing about them' (44).

Bauckham's hypothesis also challenges the reading strategy that views the Gospels as windows, however blurred, to the identity and historical experiences of hypothetical communities. It thereby smoothes the hermeneutical path from the way the Gospels addressed their first readers to the way the Gospels have been read – literally, not allegorically, as stories of Jesus – until the mid twentieth century (47). This is not, however, to disregard the differences among the Gospels; rather, 'It simply denies ... that this diversity requires a diversity of readers ... It implies only that its author (or authors) wished to propagate his own distinctive theological rendering of Gospel story among whatever readers it might reach' (47). Nor does this hypothesis decontextualize and dehistoricize the Gospels. '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' (46).

With regard to the important question of Gospel audiences, therefore, Bauckham's 'all Christians' hypothesis would require scholars to cease speculation about any specific historical context for the Gospels, beyond the general context of the early Christian movement as a whole, and to attribute the diversity of the Gospels to the distinct viewpoints of the evangelists rather than the possible diversity of specific communities. From a methodological perspective, adopting the 'all Christians' hypothesis requires scholars to read the Gospels solely as stories of Jesus without any reference to specific post-Easter communities.

Bauckham's description of the implications of his study point to what is evident throughout his analysis: the historical-critical implications of the 'all Christians' hypothesis are primarily negative. That is, the theory requires scholars to stop asking a particular set of historical questions – thereby to vanquish their 'misplaced desire for historical specificity' – but it does not open up any new avenues of investigation. To suggest that scholars attribute the diversity of the Gospels to the personalities or theological viewpoints of the evangelists is not particularly helpful or interesting given our inability to identify the evangelists or, even if we accept one or more of the traditional attribution, to say much about them. To direct scholars to the historical context of the early Christian movement as a whole implies a homogenization of that movement into a unified entity and therefore requires us to ignore the substantial evidence for difference and diversity within that movement, even apart from the consensus viewpoint that attempts to identify particular Gospel

communities. The fact that any speculation about the Gospel communities can be based only on internal evidence, and that scholars do not agree on what the Gospel audiences looked like, does not argue against the consensus position. Our inability to reconstruct these communities with a high degree of certainty does not diminish the value of the exercise, which can and has led to interesting insights about the Gospels in their present form.

Despite the negative historical implications of the 'all Christians' hypothesis, the methodological cautions that accompany it are well-taken. My own work on the Gospel of John had led me to question the theory that the Gospel reflects the Johannine community's expulsion from the synagogue in the late first century. My critique of the expulsion theory, according to which the Gospel is read not only as a story of Jesus but as a story of the community, involves both historical and literary-critical considerations. Like Bauckham, I am not convinced that the Gospel should be read as a straightforward allegory of the life of a community in the late first century; it is certainly plausible, in fact, likely, that the earliest audience, whether specific or broad, would have received John's Gospel as a story of Jesus only, and not as a drama about the history of a Jewish-Christian community.

These methodological concerns, serious as they are, do not in my view lead to the conclusion that there was no Johannine community. The absence of external support, and the methodological challenges inherent in the attempt to visualize that community, should instill humility and caution against reifying our own speculative reconstructions, but does not in itself require us to abandon the question.²² It is critical to remember that, wherever we might stand with regard to the expulsion theory, the Johannine community is a hypothetical entity; we should not hesitate to contemplate its existence and conjecture as to its contours, but we must refrain from attaching historicity to our own constructions.²³ In other words, if the 'all Christians' hypothesis requires this methodological caution, it nevertheless remains the case that one can observe the methodological caution without adopting the 'all Christians' hypothesis.

A paradigm shift should have implications not only for a single issue, however important, but for other facets of research in a given

22. Adele Reinhartz, 'Building Skyscrapers on Toothpicks: The Literary-Critical Challenge to Historical Criticism', in Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), pp. 55–76.

23. Adele Reinhartz, 'The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal', in Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *What Is John? Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 111–38; idem, 'On Travel, Translation, and Ethnography: The Gospel of John at the Turn of the Century', in Segovia (ed.), *What Is John?*, pp. 249–56.

field. Bauckham's own work illustrates the attempt to take the 'all Christians' hypothesis into account in at least two ways: with regard to the exegesis of specific passages, and with respect to the Jesus of history. His essay 'John for Readers of Mark', also included in *The Gospels for All Christians*, examines two verses in the Gospel of John and argues that they are best understood if we imagine an audience that knew the Gospel of Mark. The essay asks us to view John's audience as one that, far from being the isolated and insular community of recent scholarship, was comprised of participants in the broader Christian movement who not only were directly familiar with the second Gospel but also had that Gospel in mind as they read or heard the Fourth Gospel.²⁴

The specific argument is that two of the Johannine narrator's parenthetical explanations are best understood against the background of a knowledge of Mark. John 3.24 indicates that the controversy between the disciples of Jesus and the followers of John the Baptist over baptism took place before John's imprisonment, an event that is not narrated in the Gospel itself. John 11.2 flashes forward to Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus, an event that is narrated in the following chapter (12.3).

In neither case, however, does the *a priori* assumption that John was writing for readers of Mark lead to a more convincing exegesis of the narrator's explanatory remark than can be proposed without this assumption. With regard to John 3.24, Bauckham argues that readers/hearers of the Fourth Gospel would not have known that Jesus' Galilean ministry followed John's imprisonment on the basis of oral traditions (153). But this contention is impossible either to support or to refute. There are no details in John 3 that are best explained by recourse to Mark. While it seems likely that the audience was presumed to have prior knowledge of John's imprisonment – otherwise why refer to it? – there is no need to argue that this prior knowledge came from Mark. If the social networks and mobility were as widespread and highly developed as Bauckham argues, the main contours of Jesus' biography could have been known quite separately from the four Gospels that became part of

24. Though this may be one way to read Wayne Meeks' important article, it does not necessarily follow from the work of Martyn and Brown who are the principal architects of the audience hypothesis with regard to the Fourth Gospel. Even in Meeks' argument, which develops a distinctive identity for the Johannine community, it is not necessary to posit a group that is isolated entirely from the broader group. Bauckham is careful to point out that he does not posit literary dependence of John on Mark, but instead is claiming that the audience of the former would have known the latter (149). See Meeks, 'Man from Heaven'; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 3rd edn, 2003); Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

the Christian canon. The argument would have been more convincing had Bauckham addressed one of the major and irreconcilable chronological differences between John and the Synoptics, such as the chronology of the Last Supper and Passion.

Bauckham's analysis of John 11.1–2 has been criticized convincingly by Wendy Sproston North in her review of the book published in 2003.²⁵ Bauckham argues that 11.2 is intended to inform readers that the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus in Mark 14.3 is Mary of Bethany. North points out that John's version differs significantly, particularly in the detail that in the Johannine version the feet are the object of the anointing whereas in Mark 14.3 it is the head of Jesus that is anointed. Bauckham claims but cannot demonstrate that the 'readers/hearers who knew Mark's Gospel would not be impeded by the unfamiliar detail from recognizing the story they already knew from Mark' (165). Bauckham acknowledges, however, that John is referring in chapter 11 to the Johannine version of the story as recounted in John 12. His argument is therefore inconclusive and, in my view, inconsequential.

Both Johannine examples can be explained in at least three different ways: that John was writing for readers/hearers of Mark; that John's audience is presumed to have heard an earlier version of the Gospel in either oral or written form; that John's audience is aware of the stories of John the Baptist and the anointing from other oral or written sources. On the basis of extant sources, it is simply not possible to decide among these three options. Furthermore, deciding on one option or another does not have a significant impact on our understanding of the story. Here, as with much of the Gospel, it is the role of this episode in the Fourth Gospel as a whole, and not its relationship to an outside source, that is most important.

If the 'all Christians' hypothesis does not lead to new exegetical insights, at least in the cases examined above, perhaps it can be helpful for another major concern of New Testament scholarship: historical Jesus research. Bauckham addresses this point briefly and indirectly in his recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.²⁶ In this very interesting book, Bauckham argues against the entire enterprise of historical Jesus research. In his view, the Gospels should be read and evaluated as testimony, not as imperfect historical sources with specific ideologies and agendas that must be discerned and corrected (p. 506 and throughout).

25. Wendy Sproston North, 'John for Readers of Mark? A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal', *JSNT* 25 (2003), pp. 449–68.

26. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

It is interesting to note that of the forty-four references to his own work in this book, only three are directly to *The Gospels for All Christians*. Note 68 on p. 32 refers to the general mobility of early Christian leaders; note 43 on p. 127 refers to 'John for Readers of Mark' and states the main premise of that article: that the author of the Fourth Gospel knew Mark's Gospel and expected many of his readers to know it. This note supports a lengthy discussion of the Beloved disciple as the eyewitness behind the Gospel of John (pp. 127–29) and argues:

For readers who know Mark, it will seem that John displaces Peter from the priority he has in Mark, not only by his brother Andrew but also by the other of the first two disciples, who remains anonymous and seems to drop unobtrusively out of the story ... (127) ... John's Gospel thus uses the inclusion of eyewitness testimony in order to privilege the witness of the Beloved Disciple, which this Gospel embodies. It does so, however, not simply by ignoring the Petrine *inclusio* of Mark's Gospel, but by enclosing a Petrine inclusion within its *inclusio* of the Beloved Disciple ... (129).

This elaborate argument presupposes that the readers of John knew Mark and remembered it in enough detail that they could recognize and appreciate the elaborate literary device that Bauckham describes. Unless one accepts Bauckham's 'all Christians' theory from the outset, this argument seems just as inconclusive as the two advanced in 'John for Readers of Mark'.

The most substantial reference to the main thesis of *The Gospels for All Christians* appears in note 42 on p. 308. Bauckham comments that while he had previously argued that 'the Gospels were *written* to communicate across distanced, that is, to be circulated around the Christian communities', he had neglected a further important function: 'to give permanence of eyewitness testimony beyond the lifetime of the eyewitnesses'. In the text on p. 308, Bauckham reflects that the Gospels were written at least in part in order to provide Christians with access to eyewitness testimony after the death of the eyewitnesses themselves.

In this case too, Bauckham's insight regarding the role of the Gospels in perpetuating the Jesus story does not depend upon the theory that the Gospels were written for all Christians or require the hypothesis that they record eyewitness testimony. The idea that the Gospels were intended to perpetuate their versions of Jesus' life story is imbedded, as Bauckham asserts, in the Gospel genre itself. So much is clear from Luke's introductory address to Theophilus (Luke 1.1–4). The conclusion and statement of purpose of the Gospel of John (20.30–31), quoted above, also prescribes a specific and very important role to the book itself in the lives of its audience: that they may believe that Jesus is the Christ, Son of God and thereby have life in his name. But this role does not speak to the breadth of the Gospels' audience(s) or the trustworthiness

of their accounts. It simply means that the narrator wanted the audience – whether specific or indefinite – to view the book as both authoritative and transformative. Although Bauckham clearly feels that his theory that the Gospels were written for ‘all Christians’ is essential to his arguments with respect to the Gospels as eyewitness testimony, the ‘all Christians’ hypothesis does not in fact appear to be necessary for or integral to the ‘testimonies’ argument or its various components.

Perhaps future studies will draw out the broader implications to the ‘all Christians’ hypothesis beyond the immediate question of Gospel audiences, but the fact that the hypothesis does not appear to be central even to the exegetical and historical work of its architect casts doubt on its revolutionary potential for the field as a whole.

Variations on a Theme

According to Kuhn, there is utter incompatibility between the ‘old’ paradigm and the ‘new’ one. Throughout his essay ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’, Bauckham indicates that his new paradigm is indeed incompatible with the consensus position. As he states, ‘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’ (45).

Yet in this same article, there are some subtle hints that the gulf between the consensus view and his own hypothesis is not as absolute as the above statement implies. On the previous page (p. 44), Bauckham states that, ‘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.’ This statement is very important. As noted above, I am in full agreement that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to reconstruct the communities behind the Gospels. It does not follow, however, that there were no such communities; the problem lies to some degree in our methodologies but even more in the paucity of extant source material.

The possibility that local communities may have shaped the canonical Gospels is articulated even more explicitly by Mike Bird, who expressly denies that Bauckham intended to draw an absolute dichotomy between his hypothesis and the consensus position. In his review in the *European Journal of Theology*, Bird comments:

A detail worth noting is that the repeated objection that the Gospels might have been written initially for an immediate group of readers like a Christian house church or a Christian benefactor and his household and only then for wider circulation is wholly compatible with Bauckham's thesis. The hypothesis does not demand the particular/universal dichotomy that many impute to Bauckham. The centre of gravity of the Gospel for all Christians is that the literary phenomenon of the Gospels is not conducive to the type of intracommunity origination normally assigned to their origin given what is known of the circulation of Christian leaders and literature in the first century.²⁷

Bird concludes:

Despite the criticisms leveled against Bauckham's *Gospels for All Christians* the hypothesis that the Gospels were written for both immediate supporters and for broad circulation is arguably sustainable. The common appeals to diversity in the early church and the non-canonical Gospels do not undermine the integrity of the notion that the Gospels were composed for audiences wider than any one specific community. What is more likely to me is that the Gospels were written to tell the story of Jesus for Christians in the Greco-Roman world.²⁸

This more nuanced position is also implied in two essays within Bauckham's anthology. BurrIDGE notes that 'even the social functions of apologetic and polemic suggest that the Gospels, like other *bioi*, are written for wider audiences than just single communities ... therefore directed at wider audiences than the "community hypothesis" usually suggests'.²⁹ Though BurrIDGE is defending Bauckham's position, he is softening its language to suggest that the Gospels may have been intended both for single communities and for wider audiences. A similar point is made by Alexander. She notes that the 'plurality of interweaving networks should further warn us against an over simple dichotomy between "local" and "general" circulation of texts within the churches ... On this model, we would still allow for the circulation, say, of Johannine material primarily along a network of Johannine contacts within the wider community – though it remains true that the wider the circulation, the greater the potential for contact with adjacent networks'.³⁰

These comments suggest that the 'all Christians' hypothesis is not so much a paradigm shift as a nuancing of the consensus position. Indeed,

27. Mike Bird, 'Bauckham's *the Gospel for All Christians* Revisited', *EJT* 15 (2006), p. 11.

28. Ibid.

29. Richard A. BurrIDGE, 'About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences', in Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians*, p. 137.

30. Alexander, 'Ancient Book Production', p. 104.

how could it be otherwise? There are only four possible positions one could take with regard to the question of Gospel audiences:

1. Gospels are addressed only to specific communities and their circulation to a broader audience was accidental or not anticipated by the evangelists.
2. Gospels are addressed primarily to specific communities but their applicability to and circulation among a wider audience was anticipated or welcomed.
3. Gospels are somewhat shaped by specific communities but written from the outset with an eye to broader circulation.
4. Gospels are written only for a wider audience and are not at all shaped by or directed towards specific communities.

The introduction to Bauckham's essay implies that option number 1 constitutes the consensus position and option number 4 his own, diametrically opposed, alternative. But in reality, most scholars who uphold the consensus position would be comfortable with option number 2, whereas the above quotations suggest that Bauckham or at least some who support him would align themselves with position number 3. This may be the real reason that the 'all Christians' hypothesis seems not to have had a major impact on historical scholarship and that it does not seem to have a profound impact on the broad range of questions that currently preoccupy New Testament scholars.

Concluding Comments

It will be abundantly clear by now that not only do I not find the 'Gospels for all Christians' hypothesis convincing, I do not believe that it constitutes a paradigm shift that has the potential to revolutionize the field of Gospel studies. Nevertheless, Bauckham's discussion of the consensus position and his attempt to articulate a critique and modification are valuable because they remind us of the tenuous nature of any historical reconstruction of first-century Jewish and early Christian communities. The inability to be as historically precise as many of us would like does not mean that we should cease to investigate those communities. It does mean, however, that we must exercise humility, and refrain from ascribing absolute historicity to our speculative constructions.

No doubt Bauckham and others will continue to argue for the 'all Christians' hypothesis whereas many others will continue to find the consensus view both compelling and fruitful. Working through Bauckham's publications relevant to the 'all Christians' hypothesis raised

for me the question of why this hypothesis would be so appealing to some, such as Bauckham, Bird, and Klink, and yet unpersuasive to others, including those who, like myself, acknowledge the speculative nature of any attempts to reconstruct the Gospels' audiences. With caution and respect, I would venture that a scholar's stance with regard to this debate may depend not only on his or her assessment of the arguments for each position, but on a much more profound factor: the fundamental questions that motivate the scholar's interest in the Gospels in the first place. *The Gospels for All Christians* does not reveal any motivation beyond the historical, but Bauckham's more recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, suggests eloquently that more is at stake. This latter work articulates Bauckham's disagreement with the skeptical attitude taken by historical Jesus researchers towards the Gospels as historical sources. What historical Jesus research fails to take into account is that: 'Christian faith has trusted that in these texts we encounter the real Jesus, and it is hard to see how Christian faith and theology can work with a radically distrusting attitude to the Gospels.'³¹ He continues: 'From the perspective of Christian faith and theology we must ask whether the enterprise of reconstructing a historical Jesus behind the Gospel ... can ever substitute for the Gospels themselves as a way of access to the reality of Jesus the man who lived in first-century Palestine.'³² His intent in this book is to lay out the evidence and methods 'for ways in which theology and history may meet in the historical Jesus instead of parting company there'.³³

These comments suggest that Bauckham's interest in the Gospels is driven by his desire to marry or integrate theology and history. The 'all Christians' hypothesis allows him to set aside an intractable set of issues in order to focus on the content of the Gospels themselves; it also allows him to see himself in continuity with a chain of serious readers and hearers stretching across two millennia and many continents and countries. This is indeed a powerful image that can provide motivation for and meaning in the belief that the foundational texts of Christianity were intended precisely to testify to Jesus as the messiah and to help all Christians understand what that testimony means to them.

Not all New Testament scholars are similarly motivated, however, and I would hazard that it is those who do not share this motivation who will be the least persuaded by his hypothesis. I count myself in that camp. As a Jewish scholar of early Christianity, I do not seek the integration of theology and history; my own fascination with the Gospels is fueled by two powerful interests: the process by which Christianity established

31. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 2.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

itself as a community of faith separate from Judaism, and the ways in which the Christian Scriptures were used throughout history to justify anti-Jewish attitudes and behaviors. While I do not agree with every element of the consensus position, and, in particular, with the overly allegorical reading that is sometimes applied to the Gospels, I find the consensus position to be a fruitful one for imaging a complex and vibrant set of 'Christ-confessing' communities within and later outside of Judaism, considering the process of identity formation that must have taken place in the decades after Jesus' death, and pondering the elements of power, gender, race, and ethnicity that can sometimes be discerned, if only dimly, beneath the surface of the Gospel narratives. The idea that the Gospels were written in the context of living communities that had their own perspectives, their unique histories and circumstances, and were home to a set of unique individuals, continues to spark my imagination.

But is not historical-critical scholarship of the Gospels ultimately about truth, or, at least, historical accuracy? Here I am tempted to ask, with Pontius Pilate, 'What is truth?' (18.38). But in the context of this chapter, I would do better to quote Thomas Kuhn yet again: 'We may have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth.'³⁴ My reading of Bauckham's work, in the context of historical-critical scholarship on the Gospels, leads me to suggest that the measure of a 'good' or persuasive hypothesis is not whether it is 'true' (how would we even know?) but the degree to which it fires the imagination, and prompts new approaches and ideas that in turn lead us to perceive layers in the Gospel texts that were not evident to us before. It is for this reason that I would not ask, or expect, Richard Bauckham to relinquish a hypothesis that is fruitful for his own thinking, just as I do not expect to relinquish my own thoughts and theories on the matter of Gospel audiences.

34. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 170.