
The Audience of the Gospel: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity

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The publication in 1998 of *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* edited and with a programmatic essay by Richard Bauckham stimulated and largely set the terms for an unusually important and productive debate within research on early Christian narrative literature. Negatively, that debate has emphatically challenged one of the underpinnings of most twentieth-century redaction-criticism of the gospels: namely that each gospel reflects rather consistently the distinctive, even self-conscious theological and ideological identity of the specific proto-Christian community within and for which it was produced. If such assumptions were never universally held, they were nevertheless a basic premise of many of the most important post-war studies on the gospels and are a relatively explicit instance of the general habit in modern criticism of expecting literary texts to reflect the ideological circumstances and rhetorical occasion of their production.

Bauckham's proposal is usually read as claiming that each of the four canonical gospels was originally designed and overwhelmingly received as addressing any and all Jesus-devotees in antiquity. In more positive terms the issue under debate is how to imagine credibly the social milieu for which early Christian narratives were designed: what kinds of local and social organisation did the gospel-writers really expect from their eventual readers? What motivated the production of complex texts generically so different from the Jesus-network's earlier epistolary literature, with its explicit (though sometimes fictive) addressees and argumentative topics?

The volume under review is a timely contribution to this on-going discussion with contributions from several points of view as well as useful framing essays by the editor, Edward W. Klink III, introducing the story of the debate itself and drawing conclusions from the formative phase of a debate which seems now destined to become a permanent topic in gospels criticism. Klink is himself not only a chronicler, but also a contributor to the larger discussion: Klink wrote his doctoral dissertation under Bauckham's supervision and revised it into a pertinent monograph on Johannine audience-criticism, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141; Cambridge, 2007). In explicit continuity with Bauckham's challenge, Klink there called into question the reliability of scholarly reconstructions of the Johannine community, intending thereby to undermine what

should probably be the strong case for the old assumption of distinctive gospel audience-communities. In the volume under review, then, Klink functions as a commissioning and analysing voice, more than just as a collector-editor. The result is a volume which is considerably more cohesive than most multi-author works: the five contributions coming between Klink's *Forschungsbericht* and his concluding essay are by carefully chosen contributors (with Bauckham's own essay fittingly in the centre) and make a careful sequence. Thus of the first three chapters each surveys a corpus of texts in relation to Bauckham's central positive thesis that every Gospel was written for a universal Christian readership. Michael F Bird surveys non-canonical gospels with a view to answering the "repeated criticism... that the extra-canonical Gospels were written for specific groups, thus not *all* Gospels were written for *all* Christians" (28). Justin Marc Smith offers a nuanced typology and survey of author-subject relationships projected in Greco-Roman biographical writings. Smith's discussion of author-subject relationships and literary genre (I guess, deliberately) stops rather tantalizingly short of a discussion of genre-audience relationships, but leads nicely into the following chapter. There Richard Bauckham himself contributes an essay which takes up Margaret Mitchell's important criticism, that patristic writers often evidence rather stronger interest in the local and occasional origins of the Gospels than Bauckham's original thesis seemed to allow.¹ Bauckham's response here clarifies his claims and usefully engages the (broadly) patristic and gnostic evidence of apparent interest in Gospel origins. These three chapters take valuable steps toward a "comprehensive account of why the Gospels were written and why they are different" (103), the sort of account which this whole debate establishes as a desideratum of on-going research. In the following chapter, Craig Blomberg argues not exactly for a middle position, but certainly for a range of positions on initial Gospel audiences which will be more flexible and varied than any comprehensive judgement. In the following chapter, Adele Reinhartz analyses the debate to, I think, similar effect, though in a less irenic tone: many of Bauckham's arguments are finally "inconclusive" regarding the Gospels' initial audiences (142) and his revision of redaction-critical habits falls well short of promising a Kuhnian "paradigm shift" (142, 148, 152), but the "methodological cautions" which Bauckham has introduced "are well-taken" (144). On Reinhartz' assessment, Bauckham's proposals are not a new paradigm for all research, but rather a potentially fruitful hypothesis among others.

Some concerns of this fine volume will move a given reader more or less than others: in general I would welcome a ten-year moratorium on public use of the phrase "paradigm shift." The structuring of the discussion as a debate (with two sides

1. Margaret Mitchell, 'Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that "The Gospels Were Written for All Christians,"' NTS 51 (2005) 36–79.

and perhaps one possible compromise position) gives the volume an unusual clarity, but also distracts from the real potential of Bauckham's initiative: abandoning an *a priori* assumption that each gospel was designed to support a distinctive ecclesial identity, should invite a more nuanced, critical and complex research programme into actual Gospel audiences.² This reviewer looked in vain for a serious attempt to define the concept "audience(s)" as more-or-less distinct from "readerships," "communities" and so on. A reader might experience a text as trans-local during a performance where the audience experiences it as so intensely local that any one local community might well offer possibilities for quite different, though perhaps overlapping audiences...

It is interesting to ask to what extent Bauckham's position depends upon or tends toward any particular hermeneutical position. Bauckham emphatically disclaims any intention of importing "into the historical understanding of the Gospels a universality that... patristic writers asserted only as a theological claim" (108). Yet Reinhartz continues to detect hints that "Bauckham's interest in the Gospels is driven by his desire to marry or integrate theology and history" (151). Blomberg points out, I think correctly, that such a marriage would not follow from Bauckham's position even in its strongest formulations: whatever audience(s) historic gospel-writers intended, a four-fold Gospel canon compels modern theological hermeneutics to reflect both on universality and distinctiveness (131). Acceptance or rejection of Bauckham's historical proposal may have no necessary hermeneutical implications for Christian theological readings.

In general though, this volume is much more than a collection and gives cumulatively a very strong sense of the main lines of debate arising from Bauckham's provocation. If readers are left with a certain impatience to get beyond the constraints of a "debate" toward the open-endedness of a "research programme," so much the better.

2. Perhaps I may be forgiven a self-serving reference to the essays in Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (ed.) *Between author and audience in Mark: narration, characterization, interpretation* (New Testament monographs 23; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009).