

## **GOSPELS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS**

### **PANEL AND DISCUSSION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

I am acting as a 'Stand in' for Richard Bauckham (RJB henceforth) – very sorry to hear of his illness; see his paper on the Synoptic gospels website – basically a summary of the argument of his opening chapter.

I have been asked if I would summarize:

- a) Main argument of Bauckham's argument
  - b) My argument in the book about gospels as biography
  - c) Reviews, reactions and responses
- all in 15 minutes, so get going!

#### **1 GOSPELS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS**

Richard's original paper at British New Testament Conference at Bangor, then revised as Chapter 1. Summary of the main argument:

##### *I Questions*

Were gospels written for Christians or non-Christians? – Christians  
For specific group or general audience? – general one.

Warm-up argument – Matt and Lk's use of Mark (implies that Mark was circulating outside of a Markan community)

##### *II Critique of usual position:*

Community hypothesis assumed – goes back to Streeter, but never argued through. Confuses readers with community – two-level narratives, eg JL Martyn on John, or Weeden or Kee on Mark – gospels as allegories of communities.

##### *III Results of the consensus view?*

Sheer diversity of reconstructions (NB compare last year's SBL session with JLMartyn etc on Johannine community)

##### *IV RJB's main argument*

Consensus confuses gospels with letters; genre issue – gospels as biography

Why write down something if you are there in the community? Writing implies you are writing to other people elsewhere – communicate widely.

*V Early church picture*

Consensus suggests isolated self-sufficient communities – but

- a) Mobility and communication good in ancient world
- b) Early Christian movement saw itself as world-wide
- c) Early Christian leaders moved around – Peter, Barnabas, Paul
- d) Letters to each other and communications, messengers
- e) Close contact between churches afterwards – Papias, Ignatius etc
- f) Conflict and diversity implies network of constant communication

*VI Hermeneutical observations*

Mistake to give communities hermeneutical key

Audience is indefinite rather than specific

This does not de-contextualise argument – historical context

Links gospels to how they have been read ever since

Do not underestimate diversity of gospels

Misplaced desire for historical specificity

RJB expected negative responses to his attack on consensus – but got enthusiasm from many of us in ensuing debate that morning.

Discussions over lunch – led to the book idea, that we would all write chapters and send them in to Richard in due course; then Loveday Alexander (LCAA) & Richard went off back to Manchester in the car! Essays quickly written: book published by Eerdmans in 1998 (thanks to Sam Eerdmans with us today – see fliers about the book)

*Briefly detail the other contributions in outline:*

Mike Thompson – Holy Internet (full of very useful facts and details)

LCAA – Ancient book production (fascinating and informative)

My chapter on biographical reading implications

RJB on John for readers of Mark

Stephen Barton – can we identify the gospel audiences? (analysis of the various attempts to define the communities.

Francis Watson – theological reading is the literal reading (not allegory or theological construct for communities)

NB two things to bear in mind:

- 1) Never a unified project – we did not read each other's contributions, or agree as a group to have common mind or common strategy
- 2) Title may be misleading – 'Gospels for *all* Christians'?  
There in sexy title, and in Intro p. 2 – but more nuanced in actual book.  
Particularly important in Margaret Mitchell's paper later attacking RJB's stress on 'all' Christians.

I think we were united in opposing a hermetically sealed/hermeneutically sealed vacuum packed community within which and for which gospels were written – but there are nuances between us about the 'all' bit.

## 2 MY CONTRIBUTION

Background – PhD thesis, revision as *What Are the Gospels?* (CUP 1992), reactions – LCAA at BNTC, then USA trip, drafted piece on implications for social setting of gospels – which included audience, but also stuff about level, function etc. This seemed ideal context in which to publish these ideas. Summarize main points of my chapter:

- 1) Author, text, reader – producer, subject, audience
- 2) Traditional Consensus – by committees, about concepts, for communities  
Biographical hypothesis – by a person, about a person, for other persons
- 3) Subject – a person, comparison with biography; subject
- 4) Author – a single mind; unified theological and literary flow to each gospel (hence Christological reading of my *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* 1994)
- 5) Audience – this was the key section
  - a) Comparable communities/audiences for other bioi: much wider audiences
  - b) Genre as clue to social function – apologetic, polemic, legitimation (GNS)
  - c) Social levels – high v low, v mixed groups
  - d) Delivery & publication – esp readings out loud

Note my conclusions (p.143) about ‘target audience’ and ‘market niche’ – hence my use of redaction criticism’s material in *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (link to Barton’s chapter, or LCAA)

I am now doing an updated edition of *What Are the Gospels?* – and have included some of this *Gospels for all Christians* material in a new extended final chapter for the new edition (forthcoming from Eerdmans, summer 2004).

### 3) **ESLER’s review article**

*Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.2 (1998) pp. 235-248

Summarises RJB’s general thesis from chapter 1  
Cultural distance between groups, esp over time – accuses us of not taking it seriously enough; ancient world less individualistic  
PE’s response to caricature of the community consensus  
Significance of the diverse gospels – why did they change Mark if ‘for all’?  
3 Models – close community/home consumption v circulation for all: what about third hypothesis – shaped for local community but possible to travel further afield – good work from Thompson on communications

Critique of my chapter – tries to show how Mark 7.24-30 (Gentile woman) is reshaped by Matthew 15.21-28 for community.

My link between Tacitean or Plutarchian community dismissed – ‘flimsy to say the least’ – Esler appeals to higher social group, not like gospels.  
Also praises LCAA on production – bioi written on scrolls, while early Christians on codex.

My response – surprised that Philip should go for such a social distinction – back to *Hoch* and *Klein* literature; FG Downing ‘a bas les aristos’; across the whole social spectrum – see *What Are the Gospels?* pp. 251-4

NB also what about the variety of approaches taken by Plutarch within the same group of Lives of Pompey, Caesar, Crassus etc – CBR Pelling in *JHS* 1979 and 1980, *What Are the Gospels?* pp. 68-9, 74-5.

Scrolls – gospels are still scroll length individually – it is the fourfold gospel which provides stimulus towards codex.

PE's critique of RJB on Jn and Mk  
Critique of Francis Watson

Esler's conclusion re us not taking seriously enough 'use of social scientific perspectives' in 'text and context, community and gospel'.

RJB'S response – *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.2 (1998) pp. 249-53

Debate with Esler at St Andrew's  
Third hypothesis does not go far enough – RJB pushes the dichotomy and asks how far Esler has moved.  
Response to the social anthropological interpretation critique

Does not deal with rest of it – except to accuse Esler of 'irate response' to Francis Watson's chapter!

#### **4 SIM's review article**

*JSNT* 84 (2001), pp. 3-27

Summary of RJB

Critique – RJB based on circumstantial evidence, not on text of gospels

Critique of idea of one 'early Christian movement' (but what about Jews and Gentiles) and against mobility & communications (uses Paul)

Critique of role of evangelists and open-ended texts

Critique of genre and my work – p. 18; wonder how far 'to push the analogy' – but it is not analogy, but genre! Sim back to Hoch- v klein-literature and the different social levels (yet neither Sim nor Esler actually deal with my social levels sections of my chapter?!)

However, Sim uses my conclusions against RJB p. 19 with 'target audience and niche' and similarly uses LCAA p. 20 on books produced for communities

Communities – rehash of Streeter etc; Sim accepts that current consensus is assumption rather than properly argued for – says it must be done.

Response to variety of reconstructions of communities – argues for the historical and sociological reconstructions

Concludes – RJB not successful – but ‘done a considerable service’ – needs to re-argue for Gospel communities – important debate.

## **5 Wendy Sproston North**

*JSNT* 25.4 (2003) pp 449-68

Directed specifically at RJB’s chapter ‘John for Readers of Mark’  
- brief summary and response

## **CONCLUSION**

Look forward to Matson and Mitchell whose papers I have enjoyed reading  
And to responses from LCAA and Weeden to follow: want a good debate.