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978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

**THE AUDIENCE AND ORIGIN OF THE
GOSPELS: INTRODUCTION AND METHOD****Introduction**

It has long been recognized that any study of the Gospels must incorporate to some degree a detailed understanding of the origins and traditions of early Christianity, whether explicitly or implicitly. The modern commentary almost always begins by discussing the introductory material before discussing the text proper. This approach is simply assumed. The end result is certainly affected in principle by the starting point. This is not to say that any understanding of the text is predetermined a priori and that the text itself is left helpless to the scholar's dissecting and analyzing tools; on the contrary, the text is often used as the very tool itself by which one draws theories by which it need be analyzed. Thus, any attempt to understand the Gospels and their meaning must consider thoroughly the means by which an understanding of what they are and how they came to be directly affects how one discovers what they mean.

The danger with the above is obvious: where one starts can undoubtedly determine where one will end. Too often a particular understanding of Christian origins can malign a text so that it no longer reveals the meaning most appropriate to early Christian belief and the text within which it dwells.¹ In order to prevent such a mishap, it seems appropriate to step back from the detailed aspects of current research to see if the picture being painted by modern scholars is appropriately describing the texts as we now have them. When this is done to the Gospels, a corrective appraisal of the current view of their origin and historical background is much in need. Fortunately, such a critique has already been suggested. A trend has sprouted in a significant part of recent Gospel research that challenges the current understanding of a Gospel's audience and origin, specifically in

¹ Hugh Anderson, *Jesus and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 16, summarizes well the complexity of the study of Christian origins by saying, "Every form of inquiry into the rise of Christianity, environmental-historical and theological as well as dogmatic is confronted with the dilemma of where to start and what to choose."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *The sheep of the fold*

relation to the historical environment in which and for which the Gospels were created.² It gives an appraisal of the current picture of the Christian beginnings which, by necessity, coerces one's interpretive outlook on the Gospel text itself. A detailed look at the problem and its correlative aspects is now in order.

Problem to be addressed: its recent development

The discussion of the introductory and foundational issues of the Gospels abounds. The complexity of establishing certainty in these issues need not be explained, for it is well assumed. Within these discussions, however, a great variety of differences exists between the various results of scholarly research. But what has become almost unanimously assumed in current research is the audience for whom the Gospels were written. The current consensus assumes that the Gospels were written for a specific, geographically located audience in contrast to a general audience. Any survey of current literature on Gospels scholarship reveals how dominant audience or "community" reconstructions have become for interpretive method.³

Recently, this general scholarly consensus was questioned in an attempt to correct what some have called the unproven and hermeneutically determinative assumptions used to reconstruct the current understanding of Christian origins. This critique was proposed in the 1998 book

² This recent trend is rooted primarily in the English-language academic community. Not all methodological approaches to the Gospels have been so tied to the historical audience. For example, since the dissertations of Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2:1–11 and 4:1–42*, CB 6, trans. Jean Gray (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1974) and Horacio E. Lona, *Abraham in Johannes 8: ein Beitrag zur Methodfragen*, EH 65 (Bern: H. Lang, 1976), a synchronic reading of the FG in particular has become more accepted. Also prominent is the "Swiss School" of exegesis which focuses on the relation between texts, instead of the reconstruction of authors and their communities. See, for example, Andreas Dettwiler, *Die Gegenwart des Erhöhten: Eine exegetische Studie Zu den johanneischen Abschiedsreden (Joh. 13, 31–16, 33) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihres Relectere-Charakters*, FRLANT 169 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

³ Some recent and popular examples include the following: Colleen M. Conway, "The Production of the Johannine Community: A New Historicist Perspective," *JBL* 121 (2002), pp. 479–95; David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998); David L. Balch (ed.), *Social History of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); J. Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audience and origin of the Gospels*

3

The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences (GAC), edited by Richard Bauckham and contributed to by several other British scholars.⁴ A summary of this book's critical thesis is now in order.

The most crucial and well-received essay in *GAC* is the initial chapter by the editor himself, Richard Bauckham.⁵ Arguably this is the case because Bauckham sets forth the thesis proper while the rest of the essays simply support its various aspects, establishing a cumulative argument. Bauckham's thesis is to challenge and refute the current consensus in Gospels scholarship which assumes that the Gospels were written for a specific church or group of churches. Bauckham proposes that it is more probable that the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches and envisaged a very general Christian audience. "Their implied readership is not specific but indefinite: any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire."⁶ Bauckham's thesis is argued in five cumulative parts, each of which we should now summarize.

First, the assumption that a more specific audience is intended is simply assumed; in fact, as Bauckham argues, whereas the Christian background of the audience is often given extensive support and argumentation in its discussion, the question of the specific or general nature of the audience is remarkable for having never been discussed in print.⁷ Bauckham hopes to "sow an initial seed of possibility" against nearly all the literature of the last few decades that has increasingly built large and sophisticated arguments upon the assumption of a specific audience, "as though no alternative could ever have occurred to anyone."⁸

Second, Bauckham briefly summarizes the history of the Gospel-community interpretation.⁹ He argues that this view of the Gospel communities goes as far back as the end of the nineteenth century in British

⁴ Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁵ While the other essays are helpful, their existence can be seen as supportive arguments for the thesis which Bauckham presents. In his critique of *GAC*, David C. Sim, "The Gospels for All Christians: A Response to Richard Bauckham," *JSNT* 84 (2001), p. 5, states, "Without doubt the most important contribution in this volume is the first essay, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?,' by Richard Bauckham himself. It is this offering that presents the most sustained attack on the consensus position and the most detailed account of the alternative hypothesis."

⁶ Bauckham, "Introduction", in *GAC*, pp. 1–2. As we will discuss below, the phrase "any and every" will need to be more clearly defined. The audience is certainly not wholly indefinite.

⁷ Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?," in *GAC*, p. 10. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ A more complete history of the community-hypothesis in Gospels scholarship will be given below.

Cambridge University Press

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Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The sheep of the fold*

scholarship. With the discussion having begun in the origins discussions at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was soon considered common practice to discuss the developing idea of the Gospels' *Sitze im Leben*, which became a prominent theme just after the Second World War, and in such discussions to focus on a particular Gospel community in contrast to a more general audience. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, after form criticism had already become a standard tool of Gospels scholarship, some major works on the Gospels and their communities were produced using a relatively new method called redaction criticism. "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 redaction critics were intent on much more specificity."¹⁰ Thus, Bauckham claims, many community interpretations of each of the four Gospels began to appear on the scholarly horizon. The result of this has led to a more allegorical reading of the Gospels in the service of reconstructing both the character and history of the community behind the Gospel, but also an increasingly sophisticated use of social-scientific methods to assist with the reconstructing process.¹¹

Third, Bauckham questions whether the assumption being practiced in current Gospels research is in any way confirmed by the fact that multiple conclusions and results have been built upon it. For Bauckham, the results that are derived are simply the results of applying a particular reading strategy to the text, not of showing that this particular reading strategy does "better justice to the text than another reading strategy."¹² While not disproving the methodology behind this untested reading strategy, Bauckham argues that the relative success, or amount of detailed reconstructions, does not prove at all that a reading strategy based on a different, or even contrary, assumption, would not be equally or even more successful.¹³

Fourth, it seems more appropriate to assume, based on historical evidence, that someone writing a Gospel in the late first century would have envisaged a more general audience.¹⁴ This seems to be an appropriate counter-assumption to the community reconstructions simply by comparing the Gospels with the Pauline epistles. Bauckham argues this aspect on two fronts: first, the difference in genre between Paul's epistles and the Gospels implies a different type of reading, hence a different or broader

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–22. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26. This is not to say that the use of a heuristic method is inappropriate simply because it is unproven. What Bauckham is questioning is the use of a heuristic model as the starting point from which the rest of the inquiry takes place.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audience and origin of the Gospels*

5

readership. Second, the more basic but important question of why would anyone put in writing this information in the genre of *bios* and yet expect it to be treated like the epistolary genre. In many ways, the simplicity of this question forces us to deal with the more basic assumptions of the creative use of the Gospels.

Fifth, Bauckham argues that the general character of the early Christian movement should not be pictured as “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.”¹⁵ This aspect of the early church is not an assumed reconstruction but is supported by the historical evidence we have concerning the late first and early second centuries of Christianity.

It seems as if the ground was ripe for the broader audience promoted by *GAC*. While several prominent “community” interpretations had already begun to lessen their stance on the specificity of description of the particular community, other NT scholars argued against the trend as a whole. This is especially evident since *GAC* where entire sections within conferences¹⁶ have dealt with what may be called the “Gospel community debate.” Since this author has recently provided an extended discussion of the evidence of both pre-*GAC* warnings and the post-*GAC* debate in “The Gospel Community Debate: State of the Question,” only a summary of the current situation will be given here.¹⁷

The Gospel community debate is much larger than *GAC* and its recent critique of the current approach to Gospel audiences. The Gospel community debate is connected to several historical and hermeneutical developments going back as far as the late 1970s. At the same time it is has been through the “rethinking” of the Gospels’ origin and audience by *GAC* that the debate has been brought into focus. In light of the discussion of Gospel audience and origin since *GAC*, it has become evident that the way forward for the Gospel community debate centers upon four areas of definition.

The first area that needs definition is the use of the term “community.” A good example of an ambiguous understanding of the term “community” can be seen in the recent work on the FG by Andrew Lincoln. As Lincoln explains in relation to his own work:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Johannine Literature section, November 2002; Life in Abundance: An International Conference on the Gospel of John: in Tribute to the Life of Raymond E. Brown, October 2003; Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Synoptic Gospels section, November 2003.

¹⁷ Edward W. Klink III, “The Gospel Community Debate: State of the Question,” *CIBR* 3 (2004), pp. 60–85.

Cambridge University Press

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Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The sheep of the fold*

this study takes care to distinguish between this group, from which the Gospel emerged, and either the implied readers or intended audience that it addresses. The former may well be included in, but certainly does not exhaust, the latter. In other words, in the view posited here, although the narrative is shaped by and addresses the needs of the group from which it emerged, it also gives clear indications in its final form that its perspective transcends any particular experiences of this group and is addressed to a wider audience . . . We do not, however, need to banish all discussion of communities behind particular Gospels and any consideration of the hermeneutical significance that the enquiries behind such a discussion might have.¹⁸

Lincoln's proposed handling of the *Sitz im Leben* of the FG is too vague to be of any help. How does he plan to differentiate between the "community" that created the Gospel and the "community(ies)" for which the Gospel was intended? If he does not want to banish the discussion of communities, a more appropriate definition is needed. Even then, there are inherent dangers when one applies formative terms such as Gospel "community," "group," or "sect" to the discussion of the audience of the Gospels. Only by defining the contours of a "community" will the use of community terminology become useful.

The second area that needs definition is the nature of the Gospel genre. As Graham Stanton has warned, a Gospel is not a letter and cannot be read like one.¹⁹ The work on Gospel genre by Richard Burridge has helped define what a Gospel *is*;²⁰ what is needed is further discussion of what a Gospel can *do*. Questions concerning Gospel referentiality need to be asked of the Gospel narratives.²¹ How one understands the nature of the *bios* is not of more importance than how one understands the referential function of narrative and the reading assumptions of first-century readers. Thus, it is not just a matter of the type of genre, but the function of genre.

¹⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), p. 265.

¹⁹ Graham N. Stanton, "Revisiting Matthew's Communities," *SBLSP* (1994), pp. 9–23. Of course, Stanton is not aligning himself with the position held by *GAC*. For a response to Stanton's "loose network of communities" see Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?," pp. 26–27, n. 29, and pp. 45–46.

²⁰ Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); and Richard A. Burridge, "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences," in *GAC*.

²¹ See Hans-Josef Klauck, "Community, History, and Text(s) – a Response" (paper presented at Life in Abundance: An International Conference on the Gospel of John: A Tribute to Raymond Brown, Baltimore, October 16–18, 2003). See also Klink, "The Gospel Community Debate," pp. 64, 78–79.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audience and origin of the Gospels*

7

The third area that needs definition is the use and function of the Gospels in the early Christian movement. Part of Bauckham's argument in *GAC* was intended to critique a consensus that seems to depend on a view of an early Christian "community" as a "self-contained, self-sufficient, introverted 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."²² Two major critiques of *GAC* challenge Bauckham on his counter-depiction of the early Christian movement.²³ The most detailed critique was an article by Margaret Mitchell involving patristic evidence.²⁴ According to Mitchell, far from being unconcerned with a local audience, the patristic writers were very concerned with the local origins of each of the Gospels. The patristic evidence points to numerous local audience traditions that were interested in the historical and local origins of the Gospels. In fact, according to Mitchell, these Gospel origins acted as a "hermeneutical key" for later readers of the Gospels.²⁵ But could the same evidence be read in a different way? What, for example, does Mitchell mean by "hermeneutical key?" Two questions seem most pertinent here. First, do the patristic writers actually possess knowledge of the specific historical circumstances of the individual Gospels? Related to this is the formation and use of tradition in the early church. The second question is connected to the first: to what extent do these traditions reflect their own agendas (i.e. different from the modern historical critical understanding)? Related to this is the use of the Gospels in worship and as scripture,²⁶ the interrelation between the Gospels,²⁷ and the

²² Bauckham, "For Whom," pp. 30–31.

²³ See Philip F. Esler, "Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham's Gospel for All Christians," *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 235–48, who critiques Bauckham's picture of the early Christian movement from a social-scientific perspective. Bauckham gives a specific response to his colleague in the same journal which is titled "Response to Philip Esler," *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 249–53. See also Sim, "A Response to Richard Bauckham," who critiques Bauckham's picture of the early Christian movement from a historical perspective. Cf. Klink, "The Gospel Community Debate," pp. 69, 72–73.

²⁴ Margaret M. Mitchell, "Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that 'The Gospels Were Written for All Christians,'" *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 36–79, originally presented at the annual meeting for the Society for Biblical Literature in Atlanta, Ga., November, 22–25, 2003.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁶ See Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. A. Stewart Todd and J. B. Torrance, SBT 10 (London: SCM Press, 1963); Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000).

²⁷ See the discussions between Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *GAC*, and Wendy E. Sproun North, "John for Readers of Mark: A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal," *JSNT* 25 (2003), pp. 449–68.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The sheep of the fold*

four-fold Gospel.²⁸ As Mitchell has reminded us concerning the Gospel community debate, the path forward cannot ignore the voices from the past.²⁹

The fourth area that needs definition is the role of “community” reconstructions in Gospel hermeneutics. Twenty-five years ago Luke Timothy Johnson argued that the use of “community” reconstructions in the interpretation of the Gospels was a dangerous enterprise.³⁰ For Johnson, even if we assumed that a community existed behind a Gospel, we would not be certain how to apply the information from the text to the specific community. He uses the example of the discussion of prayer in Luke: are we to suppose that Luke stresses praying because his community does not pray (or that some in the community do not pray)? Or are we to assume he is correcting an inappropriate view on prayer; one that requires a theological lesson?³¹ For Johnson, anything but a general description of Luke’s readers does injustice to the text; it destroys the text’s intended literary meaning. Since Johnson, several similar hermeneutical “warnings” have also been given,³² even by some who support the reconstruction of Gospel “communities.”³³ Finally, the most thorough hermeneutical critique of “community” reconstructions was recently presented by Dwight Peterson, looking specifically at the Gospel of Mark.³⁴ Peterson

²⁸ See Oscar Cullmann, “The Plurality of the Gospels as a Theological Problem in Antiquity: A Study in the History of Dogma,” in A. J. B. Higgins (ed.), *The Early Church: Oscar Cullmann*, trans. A. J. B. Higgins and S. Godman (London: SCM Press, 1956), pp. 39–54; and Graham Stanton, “The Fourfold Gospel,” *NTS* 43 (1997), pp. 317–46.

²⁹ This area might also include an examination of the extra-canonical Gospels, as has recently been done by Thomas Kazen, “Sectarian Gospels for Some Christians? Intention and Mirror Reading in the Light of Extra-Canonical Gospels,” *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 561–78.

³⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, “On Finding Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Essay,” *SBLSP* (1979), pp. 87–100.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³² See Edwin Judge, “The Social Identity of the First Christians: A Question of Method in Religious History,” *JRH* 11 (1980), pp. 201–17; Dale Allison, “Was There a Lukan Community?,” *IBS* 10 (1988), pp. 62–70; Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 124–25; and Stephen Barton, “The Communal Dimensions of Earliest Christianity: A Critical Survey of the Field,” *JTS* 43 (1992), pp. 399–427, especially 425. For a fuller discussion see Klink, “The Gospel Community Debate.”

³³ See Jack Dean Kingsbury, “Conclusion: Analysis of a Conversation,” in Balch (ed.), *Social History of the Matthean Community*, pp. 259–69. While offering concluding remarks at the end of the essays, Kingsbury gives a surprise warning to such a methodological practice. “To move from text to social situation by simply invoking the principle of transparency is, owing to the high degree of subjectivity involved and the paucity of independent evidence for corroborating one’s findings, hazardous indeed” (262).

³⁴ Dwight N. Peterson, *The Origins of Mark: The Markan Community in Current Debate*, BIS 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

Cambridge University Press

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Edward W. Klink III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The audience and origin of the Gospels*

9

approaches the community-hypothesis by studying the hermeneutical principles used by proponents of such an interpretive method. According to Peterson, the purpose of his book is to show that the concept of “The Markan Community . . . is the product of highly speculative, viciously circular and ultimately unpersuasive and inconclusive reading.”³⁵ The circular nature of such a method, whereby the text is used as a window to see the originating aspects of an early Christian community so that the text can be understood, is a circular and illegitimate practice and is based upon a faulty hermeneutical methodology.

But the recent critiques of “community” reconstructions in Gospel hermeneutics are not merely due to observed flaws in methodology. The entire postmodern critique of modernity’s historical-critical emphasis is also related to the Gospel community debate. Robert Kysar has recently suggested that the “Whither” of the Gospel community is connected to the postmodern critique of the dominance of the historical-critical method.³⁶ The rise of postmodern interpretive methods that press upon the old paradigm is beginning to forge the way ahead. The alternative approaches to the text are taking their stand against the old redaction critical method of seeing in every word and phrase in the Gospels an image standing behind it. Postmodern interpretation’s denial that the text is merely a means to an end presents a radical challenge to the way a “text,” specifically a Gospel text, is read. Such approaches are not divorced from the Gospel community debate.

The above discussion of the four most pressing areas in the Gospel community debate that are in need of definition gives both direction and credence to this book. The only full monograph concerning the Gospel community debate, *The Origins of Mark* by Dwight Peterson, was actually completed with all but revisions as a doctoral dissertation without any knowledge of *GAC*.³⁷ That the field of Gospel scholarship is ripe for continued research concerning Gospel audience and origin is evident from the continued debate.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³⁶ Robert Kysar, “The Whence and Whither of the Johannine Community” (paper presented at Life in Abundance: An International Conference on the Gospel of John: A Tribute to Raymond Brown. Baltimore, October 16–18, 2003). Now published under the same title in John R. Donahue (ed.), *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), pp. 65–81.

³⁷ Peterson only cites *GAC* on two occasions, the first of which appears to be only a footnote adding comprehensiveness to the introduction of his original work. The conclusion, which may have been added during revision for publication, also deals briefly with *GAC*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13044-8 - The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John
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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The sheep of the fold***Historical survey: the quest for the Gospel community**

Before we can further the Gospel community debate we must trace the history of “community” reconstructions in the history of Gospel interpretation.³⁸ The areas of NT scholarship that we are going to use to trace the concept of “community” through are massive; each alone could warrant a historical study in its own right. Thus, in order to focus on the appropriate task, we shall only seek the origin and methodological use of the “community” concept and its gradual development into the community reconstructions currently used in Gospel research. The purpose of this survey is to trace the developing definition of the term “community” and its use as the interpretive grid by which the Gospel audience and origin are determined.

Source criticism: the geographic origin of community

The history of community reconstructions does not present a clear and precise understanding of the view that each Gospel was written in and for its own community. In fact, the concept of “community” only gradually developed as various historical-critical methods were employed to the text of the Gospels. It is this gradual development that has led to an improper and untested hermeneutical methodology, as well as the inaccurate historical picture that such a view creates. Thus, as we move through the stages of historical interpretation over the last century, it is important to note that the term “community” has not always had the same meaning or implication as it does today. Only a survey of the development will make this clear.

A survey of the introductions to the NT of a century or more ago will reveal that different questions were asked of the text. The general discussion of Gospel authorship, date, and provenance reveals their interests and indifference to the problems raised since then. The terms they used and titles given to aspects of early Christian history and theology carried a different meaning for that era in biblical scholarship. Thus, when we begin to look for the community reconstructions in Gospels scholarship we need not look too far, for such a development is relatively recent.

It seems as if the first to present the view that the evangelist wrote for his own community were British scholars.³⁹ Possibly the first to make

³⁸ Although both Bauckham, “For Whom,” and Peterson, *The Origin of Mark*, refer to its general historical development, a fuller treatment of the concept of “community” is needed.

³⁹ Cf. Bauckham, “For Whom,” p. 13.