

Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that ‘The Gospels Were Written for All Christians’*

MARGARET M. MITCHELL

University of Chicago, 1025 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

Ματθαῖος μὲν ἔγραψεν Ἑβραίοις θαύματα Χριστοῦ,
Μάρκος δ’ Ἴταλίῃ,
Λουκᾶς Ἀχαΐαδι,
Πᾶσι δ’ Ἰωάννης,
κῆρυξ μέγας, οὐρανοφοίτης.

Matthew wrote the marvels of Christ
for the Hebrews,
Mark for Italy, Luke for Achaia,
But John, the great herald,
the heaven-wanderer,
wrote for all

(Gregory of Nazianzus,
Carmina dogmatica 1.12.6–9)

Richard Bauckham has called on scholars to abandon the reading strategy of redaction criticism that had risen to prominence especially in the 1960s, and return to the way the gospels had always been understood before that – as having been written ‘for all Christians’. The present essay resituates this debate as actually yet another instance of a very old and enduring hermeneutical problem in the exegesis of Christian literature: the relationship between the particularity and universality of the gospels. Study of patristic gospel exegesis reveals no author who says the gospels were written ‘for all Christians’, and, even more importantly, shows that early Christian readers – through evangelist biographies, localizing narratives, audience request traditions, and heresiological accounts of the composition of individual gospels, as well as in their theological reflections on the fourfold gospel – engaged in a sustained and deliberate dialectic between the local and universal audiences of the gospels which defies any simple dichotomy between ‘specific’ and ‘indefinite’ readers.

* This paper was presented to the University of Chicago Early Christian Studies Workshop in October, 2003, to the Society of Biblical Literature Synoptic Gospels Section at the annual SBL meeting in Atlanta in November, 2003, and at a seminar with the Religion Department at Baylor University in March, 2004. I would like to thank participants (too numerous to mention by name) on all three occasions for valuable feedback. Although regrettably Professor Bauckham was unable to attend the SBL meeting, where he was to have been a panellist in the session, we had a profitable email exchange before this essay went to press, for which I would like here to express gratitude.

Several years ago Richard Bauckham issued a vigorous challenge to the scholarly 'consensus' (as he termed it) that each of the four gospels, beginning with Mark, was written in, and addressed to, a specific local church community.¹ He called for a paradigm shift among NT scholars away from redaction criticism, which is in his view a kind of uncontrolled reading strategy that seeks to plot a fictionalized reconstruction of a community onto the gospel narrative itself, which is treated as a screen upon which local church issues, controversies and experiences were projected. This methodological approach is misguided, Professor Bauckham argued, because, to the contrary, from their inception all four of the gospels were intended for 'all Christians', indeed, 'any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire' (1). Hence the historical context for each of the four is really the same. '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). Already in the first century, Bauckham maintains, there was an empire-wide, close-knit network one can designate 'the early Christian movement', within which literature would have spread rapidly and intentionally through frequent travel, including by the roving leaders who may be presumed to have included the writers of the gospels as well as their broad intended readership.

In my judgment Richard Bauckham's insistence that redaction-critical readings can dissolve into excessive 'allegorical' readings of the gospels as 'nothing but' projections onto the life of Jesus of concerns of a hypothetically reconstructed local church community makes a valid and significant point.² And his emphasis on travel and networks in the early missionary movements provides a very serious objection to the idea that gospel communities were completely

1 In this article I shall largely confine my attention to Professor Bauckham's seminal essay 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?', in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 9–48, and also to the summary version of his argument in the 'Introduction' to that volume (esp. pp. 1–4). The essay and summary are cited by page number only in what follows. I shall not discuss the other essays in that volume here, since the various authors pick up on elements of Bauckham's thesis, and not all of them appear to hold to the more extreme version of it, at least without some partial reservations. I also shall refrain here from discussing the similar claims made by Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 2000), because Hengel's line of argument and, especially, treatment of patristic sources sets him apart from Bauckham's article to such a degree that a full engagement with his work would require a separate treatment.

2 This point was made incisively a decade before, in Stephen D. Moore's *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989) 57 and *passim* (though less with the assumption that the designation 'allegory' is self-evidently derogatory).

isolated, and that their authors had a knowledge of *only one* local house church. His essay has been an important clarion call for scholars to reconsider some critical orthodoxies and the assumptions upon which they have been based – and this is very much to the good. But despite these strengths (which were responsible for my own strong initial attraction to it) Bauckham’s counter-thesis – at least as he chose to formulate and defend it in his seminal essay – has sufficiently serious problems of logic and of overstatement that its credibility and workability as a hermeneutical template are compromised. The main purpose of the present paper – I wish to emphasize this as strongly as possible – *is not to carry the banner for redaction criticism*, but rather to attempt to find a way forward in the study of early Christian narrative hermeneutics to a more moderate proposal that capitalizes on Professor Bauckham’s valuable insights while not wedding those to attendant claims and a formulation of the issue that are insecure. In particular I think it is most important to resituate the debate Bauckham has claimed to be the product of the excesses of modern critical methodologies as actually yet another instance of a very old and enduring hermeneutical problem in the exegesis of Christian literature: the relationship between the particularity and universality of the gospels.³

In this article I seek to engage Professor Bauckham’s influential essay from the point of view of its consonance with and representation of patristic interpretation of the gospels, because, surprisingly, this has not been previously undertaken.⁴ My focal question is easily stated: Did the earliest exegetes think that ‘the Gospels were written for all Christians’? Answering that question requires a two-stage approach. I shall begin with an assessment of the precise formulation and methodological components of Bauckham’s argument, because his thesis cannot be tested against the patristic evidence before its premises have been critically teased out and elucidated. Then I shall devote the majority of my attention to assessing those premises, in particular by reconsidering the essential factual assertion about the history of gospel interpretation that underlies his argument – that readings of gospels by reference to specific, local communities of intended readers were unheard of before the mid-twentieth century.

3 Rather than ‘open[ing] up a discussion that has never so far taken place’ (11), Bauckham is actually entering very well-trodden terrain, as we shall see.

4 Strong rebuttals have been launched from the point of view of social-scientific methodology (as by Philip F. Esler, ‘Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham’s *Gospels for All Christians*’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 [1998] 235–48) and of redaction criticism (David C. Sim, ‘The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham’, *JSNT* 24 [2001] 3–27), but I have not seen any discussion of his use or non-use of patristic evidence.

I. Building blocks of the hypothesis that ‘The Gospels Were Written for All Christians’

(i) ‘Gospels’ and ‘the Gospels’

The title of Professor Bauckham’s essay is ‘For Whom Were Gospels Written?’ This would appear to refer to gospels quite broadly conceived, but as the paper proceeds it quickly becomes clear that the focus is solely on the four ‘canonical’ narratives traditionally associated with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.⁵ Yet to restrict the analysis of ‘gospel literature’ to the four works that were later canonized could bracket out from the start real diversity in early Christian narrative and other texts,⁶ some of which are designated – by their promulgators or their challengers – by audience (e.g. the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*). It also treats the term ‘gospel’ as though it were a clearly defined literary genre or category, without having to engage the particularity of the logia in the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, or even the narrative distinctiveness of each of the canonical four.⁷ At any rate Bauckham’s interchangeable use of the terms ‘gospels’ and ‘the gospels’, and his treatment of the canonical four as uniform in this regard, cannot be unquestioningly presupposed when we turn to the patristic sources.

(ii) ‘Christians’ and ‘The Christian movement’

Professor Bauckham wishes scholars to replace the local communities of recent gospel criticism with a wider, less specific audience he terms in some places ‘the Christian movement’. His argument rests upon the assumption that there was such a thing as a worldwide Christian movement (33) in the period when the gospels were composed (roughly 70–100 CE),⁸ which would constitute a reading public so obviously delineated as to be written for or feel themselves addressed by this literature. The fact that even while declaring a pan-Christian movement already in the first century he still wishes to make recourse to such cat-

5 There is a parenthetical reference to the *Gospel of Thomas* on p. 11 (with n. 5), but otherwise non-canonical gospels are not discussed in the essay.

6 As one illustration, Eusebius preserves a tradition from Serapion about the *Gospel of Peter* which assumes that work had a particularly defined audience of ‘those who professed this very gospel’, identified as docetistic readers who are ‘the successors of those who began the work’ (οἱ διάδοχοι τῶν καταρξαμένων αὐτοῦ) (*H.E.* VI.12.6 [GCS 9.2, p. 546]). Should this text be brought into a discussion of ‘for whom were gospels written’?

7 For instance, there are differences in the degree to which audiences are (if at all) directly addressed among the four gospels, such as Luke’s Theophilus (Luke 1.3; cf. Acts 1.1), or the ‘you’ of John’s colophon (20.30–1).

8 Other reviewers have made this same point (Esler, ‘Community and Gospel’, 242; Sim, ‘Gospels’, 9–11).

egories as ‘Jewish Christians’ and ‘Gentile Christians’,⁹ and allows that there were ‘version[s] of Christianity’,¹⁰ might appear at least to qualify the key premise, and open the door for gospels in some way tailored to such versions (hence more ‘specific’ than ‘indefinite’), even if not utterly narrowly defined.¹¹ It seems fair to say that Bauckham’s assurance in his programmatic essay that his model can still account for ‘conflict and diversity’¹² still awaits demonstration, even as it will be important to test whether patristic exegetes likewise assumed there was a unified Christian reading public in the first century.

(iii) *Reading gospels and reading letters*

The argument in ‘For Whom Were Gospels Written?’ proceeds from what at first appears to be a clear-cut distinction between the way different ancient literary genres were meant to be read. In particular, Professor Bauckham offers a stringent critique of redaction critics for treating gospels as though they were letters,¹³ and consequently expecting those documents to have localized, particular

9 ‘The evidence of early Christian literature (not least the Gospels) is that the early Christian movement had a strong sense of itself as a worldwide movement. For Jewish Christians . . . this must have come naturally . . . But Gentile converts were inculcated as Christians into a new social identity that was certainly not purely local’ (33). Of course, one cannot make this assertion *on the basis of* the gospels – given that they are the very literature in question – without treading into a *petitio principii*.

10 P. 43, italics added (also there: ‘their versions of the Gospel’).

11 The line between ‘specific’ and ‘indefinite’ or ‘open’ and ‘closed’ texts (the terms of Umberto Eco), which Bauckham employs, appears to me less self-evidently clear or absolute, given the various vantage points from which one might ask and consider this question (see n. 20 below for one such example). At any rate, even that polarity is problematized by his own description of the gospels as ‘relatively open’ (p. 2; cf. p. 48). On the conceptual issue and the nomenclature, I myself think a constructive advance is made by the concept of ‘target audience’ (hence somewhere between the two extremes) advanced by Richard A. Burridge in his essay in *The Gospels for All Christians* volume (‘About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences’, 113–45, 143), but my emphasis in the present essay is on what appears to get lost in the way Bauckham has formulated the question: the range of ingenious ways early Christian literary culture was deliberately working in the territory in the middle, between particular and universal or general audiences. While his provocative formulation has served very well to get scholars to attend to the issue, it is in my view a less secure foundation for future research.

12 ‘. . . the evidence for conflict and diversity in early Christianity supports my picture of the early Christian movement as a network of communities in constant communication’ (43).

13 ‘The first stage of [my] argument consists in contrasting Gospels and Pauline epistles. This stage is important because what the consensus I am attacking has in effect done is to attempt to treat Gospels hermeneutically as though they were Pauline epistles. In other words, scholars have sought to see the audience and therefore also the message of the Gospels in just as local and particularized terms as those of the major Pauline letters, which certainly are addressed to specific Christian communities and envisage the specific needs and problems of those communities’ (26–7).

audiences. Yet as the argument proceeds it appears that Bauckham himself employs an epistolary criterion (though an oversimplified one)¹⁴ as a universal rule of literature:¹⁵ ‘The obvious function of writing was its capacity to communicate widely with readers unable to be present at its author’s oral teaching. Oral teaching could be passed on, but much less effectively than a book’ (29). The purpose of this second move is to call into question the redaction critics’ assumption that authors would write a gospel for the community in which they were resident: ‘the more odd it seems that the evangelist is supposed to be writing *for the community in which he lives*’ (29, italics original). But is such an assumption – that one would write a text for a local audience where one is resident – a fabrication of modern redaction critics, or was it in some way held already by those who collected, shaped and published early Christian literature? And did later patristic interpretation of epistolary and gospel literature once collected take as self-evident their generic discreteness, such that to ascribe a universal audience to the former or a specific audience to the latter would be out of the question?¹⁶

(iv) *Authors addressing audiences*

Professor Bauckham argues that the remarkably swift and broad dissemination of early Christian literature, greatly facilitated by widespread travel,

14 Bauckham deals only in passing with the rather significant issues involved in the range of epistolary literature, which (esp. in early Christian sources) included ‘circular letters’ (27 n. 30); indeed, even his paradigmatically occasional letter, 1 Corinthians, contains a (famously disputed!) generalized address in 1.2.

15 ‘Books, like letters, were designed to cross distances orality could not so effectively cross’ (29). It is not evident what should be included within the category ‘books’ as used here. Would this epistolary *topos* really be so completely or equally appropriate to an historical treatise, a philosophical dialogue, a rhetorical handbook, a set of poems, a scientific manual? Bauckham extends this rule to all ancient literature (‘Literature addressing a specific community in a specific locality is very rare’ [46]), but without documentation. There was an interesting exchange in the SBL session between Richard Burridge, myself, and David P. Moessner on my invocation of the example of Thucydides in this regard. Surely the great historian had his fellow Athenians and other Hellenes in mind in writing, yet (without sacrificing that ‘specificity’) the great historian also envisioned his work as meant for posterity (see especially *Hist.* I.22.4). The gap to be spanned for Thucydides, however, is not so much geographical (as Bauckham defines the role of books) as temporal: the historian seeks to recapture for the present and the future, in writing, the monumental events of the past.

16 To anticipate to some degree the later discussion, we can note here that within decades of their composition – indeed in the very period in which the gospels were written – the letters of Paul were invested with a universalist hermeneutic, by their collection and presentation as being ‘for all Christians’ (see, e.g., the important essay by Nils Alstrup Dahl, ‘The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church’, *Neotestamentica et patristica: Eine Freundesgabe, Oscar Cullmann zu seinem 60 Geburtstag* [ed. A. N. Wilder *et al.*; NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962] 261–71).

entailed a united readership, such that ‘general circulation’ implies for each document ‘a very general Christian audience’ (1). He is surely correct in stating that ‘No more than almost any other author, at their time or at most other periods, could they know which specific readers and hearers their work would reach’ (46). But that reality of course does not logically require that any or every individual author wrote or published with a self-conscious hermeneutical intention to exploit that (presciently foreseen) fact in some deliberate way. How might Bauckham’s assertion – that the gospel authors had in mind *and addressed* (in some way) every possible reader (*‘any and every church to which their Gospels might circulate’*),¹⁷ and even precisely those addressees who were beyond their own purview – have registered with patristic exegetes? Is his unspecific-audience hypothesis compatible with the ancient rhetorical *paideia* by which the tools of literacy and literary composition were passed from one generation to another? Did early interpreters see any distinction between the immediate audience of a text and its publication or distribution? Further, does patristic gospel interpretation give some insight into the ways in which an interpreter might (or might not) invoke a hypothetical audience – specific or indefinite – to resolve exegetical dilemmas?¹⁸ For example, would patristic writers agree with Professor Bauckham’s insistence that even if one could reconstruct any single author’s community (with all the difficulties attending that)¹⁹ it would be ‘of no *hermeneutical* value’?²⁰

17 P. 46, italics original.

18 For example, he issues a cautionary note on p. 24: ‘there is no reason at all why every aspect of a Gospel should be equally relevant to all readers or hearers . . . not everything in a Gospel need be there for all readers’. This leaves the exegete who wishes to adopt his model with the question of how and where the ‘for all Christians’ audience is operative as an informing principle of exegesis. When treating the whole, and not the parts, for instance? But if so, then how is that whole known if not from its parts?

19 The picture Bauckham paints is utterly pessimistic: ‘it does not follow that we have a chance of reconstructing that community’ (44); ‘the way in which a creative writer is influenced by and responds to his or her context is simply not calculable. The chances of being able to deduce from an author’s work what the influences on the author were, if we have only the work to inform us, are minimal’ (45); ‘the enterprise of reconstructing an evangelist’s community is, for a series of cogent reasons, doomed to failure’ (45). This counsel of despair contrasts markedly with his confidence about being able to reconstruct ‘the early Christian movement in the late first century’ (46).

20 Pp. 44–5. It may be helpful to cite a contemporary comparison to sharpen the difference between the difficulty of historical construction on the one hand and its theoretical usefulness on the other. The issue of the intended audiences of Josephus’s writings is hotly debated. As with NT literature, perhaps, the issues are both geographical (Rome and/or Judea), religio-ethnic (Jews, Romans, etc.), and personal/communal (patrons like Epaphroditus, his Flavian patrons, other figures he knew, and a potential audience of a wider public not personally known to him). Most critical scholars see Josephus writing quite self-consciously with an astute rhetorical eye on various sectors of his audience,

(v) *Evangelist portraits*

Who are the evangelists, according to Bauckham’s paradigm?

It seems that leaders who moved from church to church, to a greater or lesser extent, are a constant feature of the early Christian movement in the first century and a half of its existence. We must therefore reckon very seriously with the chances that some, if not all,²¹ of the evangelists were people whose own experience was far from limited to a single Christian community or even to the churches of a particular geographical region. Such a person would not naturally confine his attention, when composing a Gospel, to the local needs and problems of a single, homogeneous community but could well have in view the variety of different contexts he had experienced in several churches he knew well. His own experience could give him the means of writing relevantly for a wide variety of churches in which his Gospel might be read, were it to circulate generally around the churches of the late-first-century Roman world. (37–8)

Is this portrait of evangelists – persons with a common *curriculum vitae* which included broad travel among the churches – corroborated by the way patristic exegetes read the gospels? Professor Bauckham grants that ‘the evangelists had different understandings of Jesus and his story, and made different judgments about the problems and priorities of being Christians in the late-first-century world’ (47), but in the limited scope of a single essay he did not attempt to indicate what the sources of such distinct views might have been, if not at least to some

carefully and cagily treading a fine line. Interestingly, he begins the *Antiquitates Judaicae* with a reference to his having written it ‘with the thought that all the Greeks might perceive it to be worthy of serious attention’ (νομίζων ἅπασιν φανεῖσθαι τοῖς Ἑλλησιν ἀξίαν σπουδῆς) (*A.J.* I.5). This would apparently be the kind of ‘indefinite’ or ‘open’ audience that Bauckham posits for the gospels. But surely one would not assume that Josephus wrote the *A.J.* only for ‘Greeks’, or that he therefore wrote with some generalized Mediterranean audience in mind, *rather than* being attuned to the various rhetorical effects of what he wrote on individuals and sectors within that wider world. We know all too little about Josephus’s historical setting in Rome when writing, and even less about how much he was still in contact with and writing for Jews in Judea, if at all, but does the lack of sure information in principle invalidate its hermeneutical importance in the quest to comprehend his writings? It seems to me that the goal of good historical scholarship is to propose contextual readings of the Josephan writings, on the basis of the admittedly limited evidence, for consideration by others. The lack of consensus among scholars about such Josephan matters does not invalidate the entire historiographic enterprise (as Bauckham suggests is the case of redaction-critical readings of the gospels: ‘the many different reconstructions throw some doubt on the method’ [20]). Could *any* interpretive approach (including readings based on the ‘Gospels for All Christians’ model) pass such a test of legitimacy?

²¹ It would seem necessary for Bauckham’s argument that in fact all four of the evangelists have met this condition, given that he treats the four gospels *en bloc*. If John alone, for instance, were written by a sectarian with little contact with other Christian groups, then the generalization would be overturned.

degree the exigencies of a local context. How did patristic exegetes account for the distinctiveness of the gospel portraits of Jesus? Did they think specific locales had a role in those portrayals, and might explain why the authors set out to write in the first place? And, perhaps most importantly, did early church interpreters trace the universal readership of the gospels back to an explicit intention *on the part of the evangelists* to write works that would circulate to all the churches?

(vi) *Articulation of interpretive options*

Professor Bauckham's diagnosis of the current state of affairs and identification of the way forward proceeds from an overarching dichotomy.²² As he presents the options, contemporary gospel criticism must assume one of two things: either the gospels were written for 'relatively isolated, introverted communities' (2) or for 'all Christians' (title).²³ The logical procedure of the essay is to proceed from this 'A or B' postulate to argue since not-A (i.e., the gospels were not written for specific communities), therefore B (they were written for 'any and every church').²⁴ Did patristic authors approach the issue of the gospel audiences in this same way, and would they agree, either that these are the only two possibilities, or that these two options are in fact and of necessity mutually exclusive? In order to test if patristic exegetes would substantiate his position we must also take account of the fact that in the essay Bauckham himself employs a host of other phrases as though they were logically and substantively commensurate expressions of the all-important premise B, the true audiences of the gospels: 'any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire' (1), 'all Christians, not specific churches' (2), 'any and every Christian community of his time in which Greek was understood' (4), 'any church (or any church in which Greek was understood)' (11), 'any and every specific community' (21 n. 22), 'any and every church to which their Gospels might circulate' (46), 'a wide variety of churches in which his gospel might be read' (30), 'Greek speaking Christians everywhere' (30), 'a worldwide Christian movement' (31), '*the* early Christian movement' (22, 30, 31, 32, 33, 36, 38, 43, 44, 45, esp. 46: '*the* early Christian movement in the late first century' [italics added in both cases]), 'anywhere and everywhere in the Christian world' (43), 'whatever readers it might reach' (47). The invocation of these phrases throughout the article as though interchangeable, all under the governing

22 See also Esler, 'Community and Gospel', 242, for this point.

23 See p. 10: 'One of the two possible answers to this question', and p. 11: 'a perfectly obvious alternative possibility'.

24 Bauckham does not explain what the force of this double formula ('any and every') is. Is it a hendiadys for emphasis (hence an amplified form of 'all'), or is there a specific difference, actually (logically and rhetorically), from an authorial point of view, between writing for 'any' potential reader or for 'every' known or possible reader? In at least one place Bauckham varies the formula to 'any *or* every' (p. 45, italics added).

either/or syllogism, renders comparison with the patristic evidence somewhat difficult, for distinctions of crucial importance to patristic exegetes, such as the language of composition of the gospels, for instance, are thereby elided.²⁵ We shall need to investigate whether early gospel readers would easily subscribe either to the dichotomy itself, or to any or all of these various formulations.

(vii) *'Smoothing the hermeneutical path' – from which direction?*

At the end of 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?' Professor Bauckham remarks that 'it is certainly true that the argument of this chapter smooths the hermeneutical path from the way the Gospels addressed their first readers – an open category of readers/hearers in any late first-century Christian church to which the Gospels might circulate – to the way the Gospels have been read ever since. This was not the intention with which the argument was developed, but it is the consequence of the argument' (47). While this statement is undoubtedly an honest description of the way Professor Bauckham's own research into the question of gospel audiences proceeded, it nonetheless stands as a direct contradiction to the way in which he has set up the argument of the essay, which from the outset aims to denounce redaction criticism (the 'current consensus') for reading the gospels in a fashion alien to the way they had been read for all of Christian history up until very recently. Hence in the architecture of this fundamental essay the 'hermeneutical path' leads *from, rather than to*, the position of universality of readership. Or, at the very least, there is – and I would argue should be! – far more hermeneutical cross-wiring going on in any engagement with this question, particularly when one is making broad statements about the history of gospel interpretation. It is on that last part of the argument that we shall focus in the rest of this essay.

II. Patristic views of the audiences of the gospels

As we have seen, Professor Bauckham's appeal for a paradigm shift in gospel studies is based upon his promulgation of a decline narrative which accounts for the rise of redaction criticism. He seeks to discredit that method as a modern invention ('since the late 1960s')²⁶ that arrived on the scene without

25 This issue is crucial in particular when discussing the Gospel according to Matthew, and the different traditions about its language (of origin and of later use) and various editions, particularly among 'Jewish Christians' (see the discussion by G. Strecker in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (rev. edn and ET ed. R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1991–2) 1.134–78, who, for instance, argues that 'The Gospel of the Hebrews' was a Greek document, 'the Gospel of Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian circles' [176], and evidence cited below).

26 Pp. 10–11: 'the option that each Gospel was written for a specific Christian community – has been taken for granted in most Gospels scholarship *for some decades now* . . . it has come to

argument, and at odds with all generations of Christian readers of the past.²⁷ One of the most crucial and remarkably bold premises of this argument is that '*all readers without exception before the mid-twentieth century missed the (alleged) hermeneutical relevance of the Matthean community to the interpreter of Matthew*'.²⁸ In the rest of this article we shall take a close look at a range of evidence in patristic literature (some of which is quite well known, some less so) that appears to contradict, or at the very least complicate, this blanket assertion. The goal here is not to demonstrate the ubiquity of modern-sounding redaction criticism among patristic writers, but to bring patristic sources into this conversation on gospel audiences in a more nuanced and representative fashion. My conclusion is that, in a rush to present patristic exegetes (along with the others) as uniformly opposed to anything like 'redaction criticism', Bauckham has overlooked the extent to which patristic interpretation of the gospels was very self-consciously and complexly working at the fulcrum between the universality and particularity of the gospels (including at times an insistence upon their original local audiences). Hence the history of this problem in gospel interpretation is far more complex – and ancient – than presented in Bauckham's essay. The gospels ultimately were read as addressing 'all Christians' in that they were regarded as having communicated a universal divine truth. That they could so effectively be read this way was in fact their genius and it was a major factor in the rise and missionary success of the Christian cult. But recognition of that universal readership did not concomitantly require later Christian readers (as Bauckham insists is necessary) to disregard circumstances of an original, specific, local origin. Patristic authors, as we shall see, found many creative ways to hold in tension the gospels' historical particularity and theological universality.

play a more and more dominant role in Gospels scholarship, which *since the late 1960s* has become increasingly interested in reconstructing the circumstances and character of the community for which, it is assumed, each Gospel was written' (italics added).

27 Compare the trenchant remarks of Robert M. Grant from 1961: 'We sometimes think that textual, literary, and historical criticism were created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or that at any rate they were not previously applied to the gospels. By this convenient fiction we can present ourselves with a picture of early Christianity in which we can see faith constantly triumphing over intelligence – a picture attractive, for different reasons, both to the very orthodox and to the very unorthodox. Such an image, either of the ancient world in general or of ancient Christianity in particular, is thoroughly distorted' (*Earliest Lives of Jesus* [New York: Harper, 1961] 38).

28 P. 47, *parens* original but italics added. This statement appears at the end of the essay, but it sums up the approach from p. 1 which identifies the problem as a consensus that has come about 'in this century'. See also p. 28, where the patristic referent is made even more sharply: 'From the second century to the mid-twentieth century no one ever supposed that the specific situation of the Matthean community was relevant to reading the Gospel of Matthew.'

(i) *The treatment of patristic evidence in 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?'*

One of the most surprising things about this provocative essay is that while patristic sources from the second century are invoked as directly applicable to the first century when it comes to travel patterns of ecclesiastical figures, second-century comments on the origins and original readers of the gospels (the topic at hand) are given no serious treatment.²⁹ But precisely what makes Bauckham's contention that no one until the late nineteenth century read the gospels by reference to a reconstructed original, local audience so arresting is that it runs immediately into the potential obstacle of the early traditions associating each gospel with a major Mediterranean locale: Mark with Rome (and/or Alexandria), Matthew with Judea, Luke with Achaia, and John with Ephesus (and/or Patmos). In his essay Bauckham steps lightly over the problem by attempting to pin it on a strawman, the Swete–Streeter axis:

The view that each evangelist wrote for his own community is an old view in British scholarship, going back at least to the end of the nineteenth century, though it was not the only view in older British scholarship. The earliest example of it I know is in H.B. Swete's commentary on Mark (first edition, 1898), a major commentary in its time. Swete claims, in fact, that it was 'the prevalent belief of the ancient Church' that 'St. Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome and for the Roman Church.'³⁰ The idea here rests on patristic evidence, which Swete, like most of his contemporaries, accepts with little discussion.³¹ (13)

29 Papias of Hierapolis is treated as illustrative of early Christian travel (though he did not travel, but people came to him!), yet his traditions about the origins of the gospels are dismissed in a single passing reference (compare pp. 39–40 and p. 14 n. 7; see also p. 15 n. 10, quoted below in the text).

30 Bauckham does not note that later on this same page Swete suggestively rephrases this statement: 'but if the Gospel was written at Rome *or* for the Roman church' (Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1977; from 1913 ed.] xxxix, italics added for emphasis).

31 One does not know how to resolve the apparent contradiction here, in that Bauckham presents Swete as standing out as a milestone ('the earliest') for this view, and yet 'most of his contemporaries' are said to have likewise accepted this same patristic tradition. In fact, the association of Mark with Rome is consistently attested in Western Christian sources from the second through the nineteenth centuries. Why is Swete chosen as the inaugural moment, rather than, e.g., his predecessor in the Regius chair at Cambridge, B. F. Westcott, whose 1851 work, *An Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*, includes the following statement: 'The details which were originally addressed to the vigorous intelligence of Roman hearers are still pregnant with instruction for us. The teaching which "met their wants" in the first age finds a corresponding field for its action now' (cited from the 8th edn [London: MacMillan, 1895] 371)? Furthermore, Swete, who had rather formidable knowledge of patristics as well as of the NT, offered fully 14 pages of painstaking discussion of the patristic sources for the provenance of Mark's gospel (Swete, *Mark*, xxix–xlili), which is at odds with the impression given that he merely accepted the patristic evidence, 'like most of his contemporaries', 'with little discussion'.

How does Bauckham succeed in tarring Swete with having been the ‘earliest’ to propagate the Roman provenance and audience of Mark,³² while at the same time having to acknowledge that this ‘rests on patristic evidence’? Here is his brief response to what appears to be obvious patristic counter-evidence to his broad thesis:

That Mark was written not only in Rome but also for the Roman church seems in fact to be based only on the account of Clement of Alexandria (*ap. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.6–7), which *need not strictly require* this conclusion. (13–14, italics added)

Can the patristic (and later) sources which specify a local audience for any or all of the gospels be so easily dismissed? First we should dispense with the claim that Clement was the sole source of this tradition. Even if it were true (which in fact it likely is not),³³ multiple attestation is irrelevant, since a single case would disqualify Bauckham’s assertion that no one in the early church or later, ‘without exception’, read gospels as local documents addressing a particular community. Moreover, the origin of the tradition, even if singular, is immaterial for the larger question of the post-life and interpretive durability of it in gospel interpretation through the centuries. Apart from this attempt to present the Roman audience of Mark as a scantily attested idea in the early church,³⁴ we are left with the contention that the Clement text ‘need not strictly require this conclusion’. The footnote defending this claim reads as follows:

According to Clement, Mark wrote his Gospel, a record of Peter’s preaching, at the request of those who heard Peter’s preaching in Rome and distributed copies of it to those who had asked him. This is quite consistent with the view that Mark would have expected further copies to be passed on to other churches, in the normal way in which literature circulated in the early Christian movement. It is very doubtful whether Clement had any source for his account other than Papias’ account of the origin of Mark’s Gospel, but nevertheless the way in which he envisaged a Gospel beginning to circulate is of interest. (p 14 n. 7)

Again, disregarding the appeal to supposedly singular attestation, the real issue at stake is whether Clement’s point is (as Bauckham’s is) to demonstrate that Mark wrote with non-Roman Christians in mind, expecting his work to be disseminated

32 Bauckham’s other contention about Swete (‘for Swete Mark’s intended readership is merely an aspect of the usual introductory questions about the Gospel; it has no significant consequences for exegesis’ [14]) can also be called into question. Swete does make exegetical recourse to the Roman readers of Mark, e.g. in regard to Simon of Cyrene’s sons being known at Rome (*Mark*, 378).

33 As even Professor Bauckham acknowledges by a brief mention of Papias, upon whom Clement drew at least in part, in the note (see below).

34 Which stands in direct conflict with the abundant evidence presented in Swete, *Mark*, xxix–xliii.

to them. A closer look at the fragment in question, which is preserved in Eusebius *H.E.* VI.14.5–7, shows the opposite concern much more at work:

Αὐθις δ' ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς ὁ Κλήμης βιβλίους περὶ τῆς τάξεως τῶν εὐαγγελίων παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνέκαθεν πρεσβυτέρων τέθειται, τοῦτον ἔχουσαν τὸν τρόπον. Προγεγράφθαι ἔλεγεν τῶν εὐαγγελίων τὰ περιέχοντα τὰς γενεαλογίας, τὸ δὲ κατὰ Μάρκον ταύτην ἐσχηκέναι τὴν οἰκονομίαν. τοῦ Πέτρου δημοσίᾳ ἐν Ῥώμῃ κηρύξαντος τὸν λόγον καὶ πνεύματι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἐξειπόντος, τοὺς παρόντας, πολλοὺς ὄντας, παρακαλέσαι τὸν Μᾶρκον ὡς ἂν ἀκολουθήσαντα αὐτῷ πόρρωθεν καὶ μεμνημένον τῶν λεχθέντων, ἀναγράψαι τὰ εἰρημένα· ποιήσαντα δέ, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον μεταδοῦναι τοῖς δεομένοις αὐτοῦ· ὅπερ ἐπιγνόντα τὸν Πέτρον προτρεπτικῶς μῆτε κωλύσαι μῆτε προτρέψασθαι. (Clement of Alexandria, *frag.* 8.4–12)³⁵

Again, in the same books (the *Hypotyposesis*) Clement set forth, in the following manner, a tradition of the early elders³⁶ about the order of the gospels: Clement said that those of the gospels which contain genealogies have been written first,³⁷ but that the Gospel according to Mark had this *oikonomia*:³⁸ after Peter had preached the word publicly in Rome, and expressed the gospel by the spirit, those who were present, being many, urged Mark, since he had followed Peter from way back and remembered what had been said [by him], to write down what was said. After doing so, Mark imparted the gospel to those who were asking him [for it]. *When Peter learned of this, he used his powers of persuasion neither to hinder nor to encourage it.*³⁹

In this version of the famous tradition about the occasion of Mark's gospel there is in fact no ‘envison[ing] of a gospel beginning to circulate’; here Mark's

35 = Eusebius, *H.E.* VI.14.6–7 (GCS n.s. 9.2, p. 550).

36 Note the plural, which shows that Eusebius, at least, thinks this is not a tradition solely tied to Papias.

37 Stephen C. Carlson (‘Clement of Alexandria on the “Order” of the Gospels’, *NTS* 47 [2001] 118–25) has argued that προγράφειν here should be translated ‘were published openly’, which he offers as at least partially supporting evidence for Bauchham's argument. While the locative rather than temporal meaning of this verb is possible, I regard the Eusebian context, especially when one takes into account *H.E.* III.24.13 (which Carlson does not), determinative of a chronological sense here (with all three terms, τάξις, προγράφειν, ἔσχατον, indicating discussion of the order of composition of the gospels). It should also be noted that, even if one accepts Carlson's thesis, any support his interpretation of the Clement fragment gives for *two* of the gospels having been written ‘for all Christians’ comes at the cost of showing that the same patristic witness thought others (i.e. Mark) were not.

38 Because οἰκονομία is such an important and multivalent term in early Christian literature I have chosen to transliterate it rather than opt for one gloss. The word could be translated ‘accommodation to circumstances’ (see Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v. 942, D.2) or perhaps ‘had this opportune occasion’, or ‘providential appearance’ (ibid., 941, C.6), or, less clearly, but more literally, ‘management, supervision’ (ibid., 940–1, A.1, 2, 4).

39 All translations of ancient sources in this paper are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

gospel (singular – the text says nothing about ‘copies’) does not move beyond the Roman Christians who asked him to write it, who are presented as a rather specific group who in turn receive the document from him.⁴⁰ Moreover, in the full fragment Peter appears rather oddly disposed to the gospel which Mark wrote on request of his Roman audience (this last line is not mentioned by Bauckham). This text cannot be used as proof for an enthusiastic authorial or patronal dissemination of the gospel to people besides those at Rome ‘who were asking for it’, for that is precisely what Peter is said not to do. Nor does this fragment corroborate Professor Bauckham’s claim that since local audiences have the oral word they do not require a written text, because the place of authorship and intended readers are comfortably conflated. Neither does it provide any proof for the historical claim that there was a ‘normal way in which literature circulated in the early Christian movement’ (14 n. 7).⁴¹ The idea that individual gospels arose, not just because an author had the intention to address a universal audience but because he was *asked by some local community to do so*, is by no means unique to this passage.⁴²

Eusebius presents another version of this tradition about the occasion of Mark’s gospel, also attributed to Clement’s *Hypotyposesis*, which one might have expected Bauckham to have invoked in this context:

τοσοῦτον δ’ ἐπέλαμψεν ταῖς τῶν ἀκροατῶν τοῦ Πέτρου διανοίαις εὐσεβείας φέγγος, ὡς μὴ τῇ εἰς ἅπαξ ἰκανῶς ἔχειν ἀρκεῖσθαι ἀκοῇ μηδὲ τῇ ἀγράφῳ τοῦ θείου κηρύγματος διδασκαλίᾳ· παρακλήσεσιν δὲ παντοίαις Μάρκον, οὐ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον φέρεται, ἀκόλουθον ὄντα Πέτρου, λιπαρῆσαι ὡς ἂν καὶ διὰ γραφῆς ὑπόμνημα τῆς διὰ λόγου παραδοθείσης αὐτοῖς καταλείψοι διδασκαλίᾳς, μὴ πρότερόν τε ἀνεῖναι ἢ κατεργάσασθαι τὸν ἄνδρα, καὶ ταύτη αἰτίους γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ λεγομένου κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγελίου γραφῆς. γνόντα δὲ τὸ πραχθέν φασὶ τὸν ἀπόστολον ἀποκαλύψαντος αὐτῷ τοῦ πνεύματος, ἡσθῆναι τῇ τῶν ἀνδρῶν προθυμίᾳ κυρῶσαι τε τὴν γραφὴν εἰς ἔντευξιν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Κλήμηξ ἐν ἕκτῳ τῶν Ὑποτυπώσεων παρατέθειται τὴν ἱστορίαν,

40 Contrast Bauckham, 44: ‘surely the idea of writing a Gospel purely for the members of the writer’s own church or even for a few neighboring churches is unlikely to have occurred to anyone. The burden of proof must lie with those who claim it did.’ Such an idea, indeed, appears to have occurred to the early Christians who envisioned – and read – this tradition about Mark’s gospel.

41 That may be the case independently of this passage, but surely is not an inference to be made from it.

42 Such ‘audience request traditions’ (as I call them) are found also in the continuation of this fragment from Clement, which takes up the Gospel according to John (‘and [Clement said that] last of all John, recognizing that the bodily matters had been recorded in the gospels, after being persuaded by men of note [προτραπέντα ὑπὸ τῶν γνωρίμων], divinely driven by the spirit, wrote a spiritual gospel’ [Clement of Alexandria, *frag.* 8.13 = Eusebius, *H.E.* VI.14.7 (GCS 9.2, p. 550)]), in the Muratorian Canon (see below), and throughout the gospel prologue traditions (discussed below also).

συνεπιμαρτυρεῖ δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ ὁ Ἱεραπολίτης ἐπίσκοπος ὀνόματι Παπίας. τοῦ δὲ Μάρκου μνημονεύειν τὸν Πέτρον ἐν τῇ προτέρᾳ ἐπιστολῇ· ἦν καὶ συντάξει φασὶν ἐπ’ αὐτῆς Ῥώμης. (Clement of Alexandria, *frag.* 9.4–20)⁴³

The light of piety shown so greatly on the minds of the hearers of Peter that they were not satisfied to rest content with a single hearing, nor with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation. But with all sorts of entreaties they persisted in asking Mark, whose gospel is in circulation, since he was a follower of Peter, if he might leave a written record of the teaching that had been handed down to them orally; they did not let go until they prevailed on the man, and by this they became the cause of the writing called the Gospel according to Mark. And they say that the apostle, upon learning what had been done, after the spirit revealed [it] to him, was pleased at the fervent desire of these men, and *confirmed the writing for reading in the churches*. Clement, in the 6th book of the *Hypotyposesis*, set down the story, and the bishop of Hierapolis named Papias also gives common testimony with him. Peter mentioned Mark in his first epistle, which they say he also composed in that very city of Rome.

At first glance this fragment from Clement might seem more congenial to Bauckham’s argument than the one he has invoked. But on closer look there are still significant problems for his hypothesis. One is that this testimony contradicts the assumption that those who have the oral word do not require a written text, such that an evangelist would not write a gospel to address a community where he was present. In fact it makes the auditors themselves the cause (αἰτίοι) of the generation of the text. This term is used in ancient literary criticism for the historical occasion that called forth a document.⁴⁴ These two narratives present inverse αἰτίαι to the way Bauckham has depicted the occasion of the gospels – rather than individual authors taking the initiative and remarkable foresight to address wide audiences even beyond their purview (‘any and every Christian’), these traditions make the readers themselves an eager and particular group who requested a text be written *for them*. The point for our purposes (as with the previous Clement fragment considered) is not to argue that this tradition is historically accurate, but to insist that it does represent what some early church readers *thought* about the origins of the gospels (in this case, Mark). Most important for the question of gospel audiences, this tradition, unlike the one just discussed, seems designed precisely to bridge the gap between local and more widespread readership. In this case Peter is not reluctant, but himself pronounces the *imprimatur* on Mark’s text, allowing for its readership ‘in the churches’. This could variously refer (at the successive layers of this tradition, from Papias to Clement to Eusebius, who might differ on their assumptions) to the ‘churches at Rome’ or to ‘the churches’ (as some unspecified entity beyond Rome). The text does not, however, say that Peter

43 = Eusebius. *H.E.* II.15.1–2 (GCS n.s. 6.1, p. 140).

44 See also the use of it in Eusebius, *H.E.* III.24.7 (GCS n.s. 6.1, p. 244).

approved or disseminated this text to ‘all the churches’, or anything like the ‘any and every church’ of the Bauckham proposal. That Eusebius or one of his predecessors interpreted it that way is of course not impossible, but it is not so stated.⁴⁵ Most importantly, the fact that such a tradition arose at all (indeed, in this case, declared to be dependent upon a Spirit-revelation) is indicative of the hermeneutical awareness in the early church of the multi-dimensional addressees of the gospel literature. Like the letters of Paul, though locally situated in their inaugural voyages, these texts are here presented as having made a *transition to a universal readership*. This fragment from Clement is one way of accounting for the post-compositional shift from more limited authorial design to eventual general usage,⁴⁶ and it is part of the larger, insistent paradoxes that govern patristic gospel interpretation between the human and divine authorship of these texts, and the particular witness of each gospel in relation to the unified testimony of them all.⁴⁷ This fascinating tradition attributes the key role to the Spirit, exerted in the original oral proclamation, in the hearts of those who asked for a text, and in the apostolic approval of what Mark had written, but, surprisingly, *not* in the act of Mark’s writing, which was, according to this text, in response to an unlikely, even almost unwitting, human αἰτίαι. Surely this text describes an original local audience for Mark’s gospel among the Roman churches, even as its ultimate purpose is to show how the immediate audience’s historical ownership of this text was later to be superceded. And, perhaps most importantly, the text is quite clear that it was not the evangelist Mark who had the larger picture in view! Hence it is not only the fact of these ancient audience traditions, but also their form and logic, that tell against Bauckham’s formulation that the evangelists themselves intended to address ‘all Christians’.

These traditions of Clement’s are undoubtedly dependent upon Papias’s words about ‘the elder’s’ account of the origins of Mark’s gospel as written by the

45 Hermann F. von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin: Dunckler, 1902) cites one gospel prologue which, likely in dependence upon this tradition, says of Mark’s gospel that ἐξεδόθη παρὰ Πέτρου τοῦ πρωτοκορυφαίου τῶν ἀποστόλων τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ οὖσιν πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς (‘it was published under the aegis of Peter the chief leader of the apostles for the faithful brethren who were in Rome’ (1.312).

46 Another tactic found in later traditions is to have Mark or Matthew compose his gospel for a local audience in Italy or Judea because the evangelist himself was soon to leave their presence (Mark to Alexandria [Epiphanius *Pan.* 6.10; cf. Eusebius, *H.E.* II.16 (GCS n.s. 6.1), with further references in Swete, *Mark*, xxxix]; Matthew to Asia Minor, where he is reputed to have died a martyr at Hierapolis [see examples of prologues cited by von Soden, *Die Schriften*, 1.305, 307, 313, etc.]). This is the inverse of Bauckham’s epistolary image of the evangelists sending out their gospels to audiences elsewhere.

47 Valuable discussion and rich source material may be found in the major monographs by Helmut Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien* (WUNT 13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971) and *Die Pluralität der Evangelien als theologisches und exegetisches Problem in der Alten Kirche* (Traditio christiana 3; Bern: Lang, 1978).

interpreter of Peter. Clement himself emphasizes the location of Rome more than the critique of Mark as writing οὐ μέντοι τάξει, ‘not in order’. Papias’s tradition about Matthew, which Professor Bauckham does not discuss, identified the particularity of that gospel in terms of language: Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο (‘Matthew, then, composed the sayings in the Hebrew language’).⁴⁸ As we have noted, in some of the formulations of Bauckham’s counter-proposal the Greek-speaking skills of the universal Christian audiences of the gospels are mentioned, but in others not, so it is difficult to pin him down on whether language is deemed a significant factor in the stipulation that the reading public of the gospels was all Christians – especially given the fact that the patristic authors did not share his modern critical judgment that Matthew was written in Greek. At any rate, for Papias language of composition differentiated Matthew’s readers from Mark’s readers (hence also his emphasis on Mark as Peter’s ἑρμηνευτής). This presumption about the Semitic original of Matthew was to be a constant in patristic and medieval gospel interpretation, and from it considerable inferences about Matthew’s local community were made. Already in the third century, if not earlier, gospel interpreters such as Origen had made the easy logical inference from the (supposed) Hebrew language of composition that Matthew’s gospel was addressed specifically to believers of Jewish background:

ὔστερον δὲ ἀπόστολον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ Ματθαῖον, ἐκδεδοκότα αὐτὸ τοῖς ἀπὸ Ἰουδαϊσμοῦ πιστεύουσιν, γράμμασιν Ἑβραϊκοῖς συντεταγμένον. (Origen, *Frag. in Mt.* 1.8)⁴⁹

later Matthew, an apostle of Jesus Christ, published [his gospel], composed in Hebrew letters, for those from Judaism who had come to believe.

By the time of Jerome the next step had been made: inferring that the gospel was written in Judea. The late antique and medieval gospel prologues include all these deductions, and even add Judean origin to their biographical interest in the evangelist Matthew: *Mattheus ex Iudaea sicut in ordine primus ponitur, ita evangelium in Iudaea primus scripsit*;⁵⁰ others narrow the place of composition to Jerusalem, and even depict Matthew as having handed his gospel over directly to James the brother of the Lord.⁵¹ The latter tradition, as with the Prologues

48 Papias, *frag.* 2.16 = Eusebius, *H.E.* III.39.16 (GCS n.s. 6.1, p. 292); cf. *H.E.* VI.25.4 (GCS n.s. 9.2, p. 576).

49 = Eusebius, *H.E.* VI.25.3–6 (GCS n.s. 9.2, p. 576).

50 ‘Matthew from Judea, set first as in the usual order, as the first wrote his gospel correspondingly in Judea’ (‘Prologi Monarchianorum’, dating from after the fourth century; cited from Kurt Aland, *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum* [11th ed; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1976] 538). Some of the gospel prologues merely say it was written ἐν Ἀνατόλῃ, (e.g. von Soden, *Die Schriften*, 1.312).

51 E.g. from the lives of the evangelists attributed to Dorotheus of Tyre (otherwise unknown), as cited in von Soden, *Die Schriften*, 1.307: Ματθαῖος ὁ εὐαγγελιστὴς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ

in general, is based on Jerome.⁵² This snowballing of traditions depends upon the assumption – held already in antiquity by such scholars as Origen and Jerome – that language, place and addressees of the gospels can be correlated with one another. Matthew’s special pedigree, according to patristic interpretation, is Semitic language, Judean provenance and Jewish audience. Once Papias had introduced this distinction in language, those about readership and provenance rather naturally followed (even among interpreters who, like Origen, read Matthew in the Greek).⁵³

(ii) *The place of gospel audiences in patristic biblical study*

Contrary to the impression one might receive from Professor Bauckham’s essay, these traditions about Markan and Matthean authorship, which extend from Papias to Irenaeus to Clement to Origen to Eusebius, are not odd, minority voices, but they become the dominant way of thinking about gospel origins in the early church (and for much of later interpretation in the West). Once enshrined in the Eusebian masterwork, *historia ecclesiastica*, and the writings of Jerome in the West, their influence was pervasive and enduring from late antiquity up through modernity. Bauckham downplays their influence with a dismissive footnote: ‘Even if the four Gospels originally had the prestige of being the local Gospels of particular major churches, there is no evidence at all that this factor was operative in the second century, when the survival of all four to form the four-Gospel canon was at stake’ (15 n.10), and accords to Streeter the honor of having been ‘one of the first

κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῇ ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ συνέγραψε καὶ ἐκδέδωκεν αὐτὸ εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ Ἰακώβῳ τῷ ἀδελφῷ τοῦ κυρίου τῷ κατὰ σάρκα ἐπισκόπῳ ὄντι τῆς Ἱερουσαλὴμ (‘Matthew the evangelist composed the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Hebrew language and handed it over in Jerusalem to James the brother of the Lord according to the flesh, when he was bishop of Jerusalem’).

52 See his prologue to the commentary on Matthew: *Primus omnium Matthaeus est publicanus cognomento Levi, qui evangelium in Judaea hebraeo sermone edidit, ob eorum vel maxime causam, qui in Jesum crediderant ex Judaeis* (PL 26.18) (‘First of all, Matthew was a tax-collector, whose cognomen was Levi, who published the gospel in Judea in the Hebrew language, in consideration, chiefly, of those from the Jews who believed in Jesus’). On the influence of such comments on later interpretive traditions see Kevin Madigan, *Olivi and the Interpretation of Matthew in the High Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003): ‘In the High Middle Ages, no Latin exegete proposed an order of composition or suggested places of origin different from those proposed by Jerome and Augustine’ (16–17). Madigan also notes that ‘Patristic and medieval interpreters also appreciated that each of the evangelists had significantly different intentions and that each had highlighted one major aspect of Christ’s person or work’ (17), a description fully compatible with many versions of redaction criticism.

53 In the *argumenta* found in medieval codices Matthew’s translator is sometimes said to be anonymous, at other times identified as John or Bartholemew (see von Soden, *Die Schriften*, 1.308, 322, 312 respectively).

scholars to stress the local origins of all four Gospels in such a way as to fuse the two questions of the local context *in which* a Gospel was written and the audience *for which* it was written' (15, italics original). But this statement, set in serious doubt by the evidence we have already considered, is further disconfirmed by many more examples from among the ancient canon-lists, gospel prologues, and ὑποθέσεις, the essential purpose of which, in accord with ancient literary criticism generally, was to direct and condition reading. By including such short plot summaries and often κεφάλαια or chapter lists in manuscripts, early Christians established cultures of reading and reception for their literature, using the bibliographic techniques of the late-antique library and schoolroom. The history of these prologues is complex, as the terse earliest traditions are expanded and filled in with further information about the evangelists and the contexts of the composition of their writings. The ubiquity of these prologues in the manuscript traditions demonstrates that the question of the αἰτία, or historical occasion, of each gospel was considered an important piece of information readers should have in mind before encountering that text;⁵⁴ it was part of the hermeneutical apparatus of the fourfold gospel, even as the intent of these scholarly aids was not to insist upon the solely human authority behind these texts. Along with other ancient literary critics, early Christian biblical interpreters were concerned with at least two 'historical preoccupations': 'problems of authenticity, and biographical facts about authors'.⁵⁵ The prevailing solutions in Christian circles were to coalesce the two concerns, such that the authenticity of the gospels was grounded in their apostolic or sub-apostolic authorship. But biographical details about the evangelists of necessity required consideration of their homes and the audiences of their preaching and writings. A full biographical curriculum (influenced by ancient encomiastic traditions) for each would emerge which included their own homeland, the language and place in which they wrote and, often, the specific occasion that moved them to do so, which involved a particular audience and need that had to be addressed. This ubiquitous interest in the individuality of the evangelists stands in stark contrast to the almost generalizable evangelists conjured by Bauckham, who all address the same generic 'any and every church' in 'the Christian movement' throughout the Mediterranean world. What is especially significant for the present argument is that in the development of the gospel prologues from the

54 On traditions forming the ancient commentary-prologue, or ὑπόθεσις/*argumentum*, in the rhetorical schools, see B. Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe* (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 18/1; Basel: Reinhardt, 1987) 57–67, and Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997) 87: 'Historia is the enquiry that produces as much information as possible with respect to the elements, actions, characters or background of the text.'

55 Quotations from D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981) 159.

earliest church into the medieval period and beyond (which was in continual conversation with the commentarial traditions), the expansion and ongoing attempts to standardize the prologues to include all the possible information about gospel origins, the three forms of designation for gospels – language of the document, place of composition, and intended readers – are continually conflated and treated as co-extensive, as the parallelism in these forms shows.⁵⁶

The misnamed ‘Anti-Marcionite Prologues’ have had a complex editorial and text-critical history, reaching back perhaps to second-century Greek originals, and forward into medieval Greek and Latin manuscripts, which supply our only attestation of the earlier material. The most interesting for our purposes is the long and compositionally aggregate prologue to the Gospel according to Luke.⁵⁷ I shall cite the Greek version here:

Ἔστιν ὁ Λουκᾶς Ἀντιοχεὺς Σύρος, ἰατρὸς τῆ τέχνη, μαθητῆς ἀποστόλων γενόμενος καὶ ὕστερον Παύλῳ παρακολουθήσας μέχρις τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ, δουλεύσας τῷ κυρίῳ ἀπερισπάστως, ἀγύναιος, ἄτεκνος, ἐτῶν ὀγδοήκοντα τεσσάρων ἐκοιμήθη ἐν τῇ Βοιωτίᾳ, πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου. οὗτος προυπαρχόντων ἤδη εὐαγγελίων, τοῦ μὲν κατὰ Ματθαῖον ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ ἀναγραφέντος, τοῦ δὲ κατὰ Μάρκον ἐν τῇ Ἰταλίᾳ, [οὗτος] προτραπεῖς ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου ἐν τοῖς περὶ τὴν Ἀχαΐαν τὸ πᾶν τοῦτο συνεγράψατο εὐαγγέλιον, δηλῶν διὰ τοῦ προοιμίου τοῦτο αὐτὸ ὅτι πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἄλλα ἐστὶ γεγραμμένα καὶ ὅτι ἀναγκαῖον ἦν τοῖς ἐξ ἔθνῶν πιστοῖς τὴν ἀκριβῆ τῆς οἰκονομίας ἐκθέσθαι διήγησιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ ταῖς Ἰουδαϊκαῖς μυθολογίαις περισπᾶσθαι αὐτούς, μήτε ταῖς αἰρετικαῖς καὶ κεναῖς φαντασίαις ἀπατωμένους ἀστοχῆσαι τῆς ἀληθείας.

Luke is from Syrian Antioch, a healer by craft, one who was a disciple of the apostles, and later followed Paul until his martyrdom, having served the Lord without distraction, wife-less, child-less; reaching 84 years he died in Boetia, filled with the holy spirit. Although gospels were previously in existence – that according to Matthew having been written in Judea, that according to Mark in Italy – incited by the holy spirit in the regions around Achaia, he composed this entire gospel, making clear in his introduction the very fact that others had been written before him, and that it was necessary to set forth *for the believers from the Gentiles* the accurate narrative of the story of salvation in order that they not be distracted by Jewish mythic tales, nor deceived by heretical and vain imaginings to miss the mark of the truth.⁵⁸

56 See the later ‘Prologi Monarchianorum’ (Aland, *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum*, 538–9).

57 The dating of various parts of his prologue has been the subject of controversy (see Jürgen Regel, *Die antimarcionitischen Evangelienprologue* [Vetus Latina, aus der Geschichte der lateinischen Bibel 6; Freiburg: Herder, 1969] 197–265). Because Bauckham’s claim encompasses all interpreters up until the twentieth century, we can happily avoid those debates here.

58 A. von Harnack, ‘Die ältesten Evangelien-Prologe und die Bildung des Neuen Testaments’, *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie des Wissenschaften* (1928) 322–41, 324, reprinted in Aland, *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum*, 533 (the Latin text, which is on the whole quite close, appears there as well). See also the translation and discussion in Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (2 vols; AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 1.38–9.

Clearly it is not only modern redaction critics who ‘simply assum[e] that the question about the context in which a Gospel was written and the question about the audience for which a Gospel was written are the same question’ (16). The gospel prologues in medieval manuscripts, which are based on complex histories that extend back into late antiquity, show that from early on Christian commentators did just that. This undermines Professor Bauckham’s premise that in ancient literature generally ‘these [are] two different questions’ (16). Heresiological explanations for the composition of a gospel, such as we find in this prologue, logically entail a specific audience at a particular time in peril which is in need of a new gospel for correction and protection – in this case in Greece, after the other two Synoptics had been composed in Judea and Italy respectively. The antiquity of the hermeneutical approach which Bauckham has characterized as a recent aberration – of (in his terms) reading gospels as though they were letters – is shown by the fact that this prologue unhesitatingly gives the Gospel according to Luke the same audience and purpose as the Pastoral Epistles, quite overtly applying their distinctive invective vocabulary to describe the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel according to Luke.⁵⁹

The Muratorian Canon, which most scholars place in Rome in the second half of the second century,⁶⁰ although fragmentary enough not to include Matthew, and to make only a brief allusion to Mark’s composition (*quibus* [the Roman Christians?] *tamen interfuit et ita posuit*), finds it important to include mention of a legend about the origin of John’s gospel. Like the other traditions we have so far discussed, it proposes an explanation of the particularity and universality of that gospel account:

[9] *Quartum evangeliorum Iohannis ex discipulis. [10] cohortantibus condiscipulis et episcopis suis [11] dixit ‘Conieiunate mihi hodie triduo, et quid [12] cuique fuerit revelatum alterutrum [13] nobis enarremus’. eadem nocte reve [14] latum Andreae ex apostolis, ut recognos [15] centibus cunctis Iohannes suo nomine [16] cuncta describeret. et ideo, licet varia sin [17] gulis evangeliorum libris principia [18] doceantur, nihil tamen differt creden [19] tium fidei, cum uno ac principali spiritu de [20] clarata sint in omnibus omnia . . .*⁶¹

[10] The fourth of the Gospels, that of John (one) of the disciples. [11] When his fellow-disciples and bishops urged [him], he said: [12] Fast with me

59 αἱ Ἰουδαῖκαὶ μυθολογίαι (Titus 1.14; cf. 1 Tim 1.4; 4.7; 2 Tim 4.4); ἀστοχῆσαι τῆς ἀληθείας (2 Tim 2.18; cf. 1 Tim 1.6; 6.21).

60 This is because of the reference in lines 73ff. to the Shepherd of Hermas as having recently been written there (Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia, 1999] 19–21); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987] 191–4).

61 The original spelling of the *Canon Muratorianus* is notoriously crude; I cite here the reconstruction of Lietzmann (from Aland, *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum*, 538).

today for three days [13] and, what will be revealed to each one, let us relate to one another [14]. In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the Apostles, that, whilst all were to go over (it), John in his own name should write everything down. [15] And therefore, though various rudiments (or: tendencies?)⁶² are taught in the several Gospel books, [16] yet that matters nothing for the faith of believers, [17] since by the one and guiding (original?) Spirit everything is declared in all . . .⁶³

Although this remarkable tale winds up where Professor Bauckham starts – with a gospel narrative (John) of apparently universal reference – it has to travel a much longer distance than the mind or pen of the author to get there. The evangelist John is not presented as having in his intention a universal church whom he as author self-consciously decided to address, but instead (as in the examples cited above) as having been persuaded to do so – in this case not by a local church but by the higher eschelon of disciples of the Lord and bishops. Here a committee model of authorship is envisioned,⁶⁴ with a second apostle, Andrew, being in receipt of an ecstatic experience that valorizes the holy hermeneutic by which an apparently single-author document is transformed into a more broadly based and universally reliable divine account. This myth of origins of the Gospel according to John as enshrined in the Muratorian Canon list is meant to provide the hermeneutical parameters of unified gospel reading for the texts that follow in the codex (the quotation continues with a plot summary offered as common material represented across the *tetraeuangelion*). Near the same time, Irenaeus also provides a heresiological account of the purpose of John's gospel, as written to dissuade its readers from the teachings of Cerinthus and the Nicolaitans. The persuasive strategy of the gospel is focused directly on this attempt to address that audience and others who might be aligned with them, and persuade (*suadere*) them that there was only one God, who created all through his Logos.⁶⁵ A later

62 *principia* here is ambiguous: it could also mean 'chief principles or elements', or 'beginnings' (i.e. to the gospel narratives).

63 Trans. W. Schneemelcher, in R. McL. Wilson, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1.34–5.

64 This tradition (historically fanciful, to be sure) seems to envision precisely the hermeneutic Burridge, 'About People', 116, rejects out of hand: 'authorship by committee with notes from a secretary' (116)!

65 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.1: *Hanc fidem adnuntians Iohannes Domini discipulus, uolens per Euangelii adnuntiationem auferre eum qui a Cerintho insemnatus erat hominibus errorem et multo prius ab his qui dicuntur Nicolaitae, qui sunt uulsio eius quae falso cognominatur scientiae, ut confunderet eos et suaderet quoniam unus Deus qui omnia fecit per Verbum suum, et non, quemadmodum illi dicunt, alterum quidem Fabricatorem, alium autem Patrem Domini . . . omnia igitur talia circumscribere uolens discipulus Domini et regulam ueritatis constituere in Ecclesia quia est unus Deus omnipotens . . . sic inchoauit in ea quae est secundum Euangelium doctrina* (quotes 1.1–5) ('John, a disciple of the Lord, proclaims this faith, wishing by the proclamation of the gospel to eradicate the error which had been sown in people by Cerinthus, and much before that by those who are called Nicolaitans

tradition attributed to Sophronius, which includes rather lengthy βίοι of the evangelists as part of the αἰτίαι of each gospel, retells this tradition in the form of an ‘audience request’ narrative:

Ἰωάννης . . . ἔσχατος πάντων ἔγραψεν εὐαγγέλιον, παρακληθεὶς παρὰ τῶν τῆς Ἀσίας ἐπισκόπων καὶ κατὰ Κηρίνου καὶ ἄλλων αἰρετικῶν καὶ μάλιστα τηνίκαια τοῦ τῶν Ἐβιονίτων δόγματος ἀνακύψαντος, τῶν φασκόντων τὸν Χριστὸν πρὸ Μαρίας μὴ γεγενῆσθαι. ὅθεν ἠναγκάσθη τὴν θεῖαν γέννησιν εἰπεῖν.⁶⁶

John . . . last of all wrote a gospel, when he had been asked by the bishops of Asia [to write] against Cerinthus and the other heretics, and especially against the teaching of the Ebionites that was popping up. The latter say that the Christ did not exist before Mary, for which reason he [the evangelist] was compelled to speak about Christ’s divine generation.

Here we have an imagined scene of a specific gospel audience of Christians in a named locale (Asia) who were at risk of succumbing to quite particular heretical teachings there prevalent. Of utmost significance, this reconstruction of the local audience is used as an exegetical principle that helps explain features of the text of the gospel – in this case, the distinctive incipit of John, which is said to have been written to combat these precise heretical Christologies.⁶⁷ This tradition – that John’s gospel was originally written to rebut specific heresies – in line with ancient literary criticism identifies a literary σκοπός, ‘goal’, attuned to a particular audience. But it does not do so at the cost of universal meaning, either (in fact the original occasion is meant to validate use of this text to ward off heresy for all time). This is one of the many ways in which patristic exegetes sought to hold in tension simultaneously the particularity of each of the gospels – including

[who are a branch plucked from that which is falsely called “knowledge”], in order to confound them and persuade them that God is one who made all things through his Word, and not, as they say, that there is one Creator, and the Father of the Lord another . . . the disciple of the Lord, then, wishing to limit all such ideas and establish the rule of truth in the church that there is one God the all powerful . . . began his treatment of the teachings which are in accordance with the Gospel as follows [quotes 1.1–5]’ (Latin text ed. A Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, livre III* [SC 211/2; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1874] 138–40; my trans.).

66 Text from the collection by von Soden (1.309–10), who cites as an example *Paris, Bibl. Nat. Suppl. Gr. 1225*, from the thirteenth century (*Die Schriften*, 1.145), with a cross-reference to PG 123 (Theophylact’s gospel commentary from the eleventh–twelfth centuries).

67 This compiled prologue also knows of a second traditional αἰτίαι (that is the word used) for this gospel that tells of how John had read the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and pronounced that their chronologies of the life of Jesus were indeed accurate, provided that one realized that the one-year mission at the end of which he died refers to Jesus’ deeds after the imprisonment of John the Baptist, whereas in his own gospel he decided to tell of all three years of Jesus’ ministry.

recognized differences in detail from the others – with their universal truthfulness and concordant testimony.

One of the clearest examples of this tensive impulse at work in patristic gospel interpretation is the treatment of Luke's named addressee, Theophilus (Luke 1.3; Acts 1.1). Origen records a debate among Christians of his day about who was the intended audience of Luke's work. 'Some people', Origen acknowledges, 'reasonably suppose that Luke wrote for someone named Theophilus' (Εἰκὸς δὲ ὑπολαμβάνειν τινὰς, ὅτι Θεοφίλῳ τινὶ ἔγραψε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον). Origen does not deny this (and elsewhere himself affirms it),⁶⁸ but seeks to add onto it: 'but we all, if we might be of such calibre as to be loved and esteemed by God, are "theophiloi"' (Ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες, ἐὰν τοιοῦτοι ὦμεν ὡς ἀγαπᾶσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ φιλεῖσθαι, θεοφιλοὶ ἐσμεν).⁶⁹ Here is yet a different strategy, attuned to the textual particularities of the third gospel, by which an explicit, clearly defined addressee is (by virtue of his fortuitous name) hermeneutically enlarged to include a wider readership. Origen does not feel the need to root this in the historical intention of the evangelist, though he probably would not have sought to deny it, either. Luke's gospel, as Origen understands it, *was* directed for a particular named audience, but it is also theoretically available to all – not necessarily by virtue of authorial intention, but by readerly character that qualifies one to be worthy of the designation 'beloved of God' to whom the book is addressed. Origen's non-dichotomous rendering of Theophilus is preserved in the prologue traditions, such as the following, which goes back at least to the προοίμια of Theophylact:

[Λουκάς] γράφει δὲ πρὸς Θεοφίλον συγκλητικὸν ὄντα καὶ ἄρχοντα ἴσως· τὸ γὰρ <κράτιστος> ἐπὶ τῶν ἀρχόντων καὶ ἡγεμόνων ἐλέγετο, ὡς καὶ ὁ Παῦλος φησὶ πρὸς τὸν ἡγεμόνα Φῆστον <κράτιστε Φῆστε>. καὶ πᾶς δὲ ἄνθρωπος θεοφιλῆς καὶ κράτος κατὰ τῶν πάθων ἀναδεξάμενος Θεοφίλος ἐστὶ κράτιστος, ὃς καὶ ἄξιός τῳ ὄντι ἐστὶν ἀκοῦειν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου.⁷⁰

And [Luke] writes to Theophilus, who was probably a senator and ruler; for the term 'most excellent' was spoken in the case of rulers and governors, as also Paul addressed the governor Festus as 'most excellent' [Acts 26.25]. But also every person who is godloving and has received power against the

68 'Θεοφίλον' δὲ ὀνομάζει πρὸς ὄντινα προσφώνει τὸ παρὸν 'εὐαγγέλιον', ἄνδρα πεπιστευκότα, Θεοφίλον φερωνύμως καλούμενον ὃς ἀπλήστως ἔχων περὶ τὰς τοῦ κυρίου πράξεις τε καὶ λόγους ἔγγραφον ἤτησεν ἔχειν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, 'He named the person to whom he addresses the present gospel Theophilus, a man who had come to belief, suitably named "Theophilus," who had an insatiable appetite for the deeds and words of the Lord, and asked to have the gospel in written form' (*Frag. in Luc.* 26–27 [GCS 35, p. 229]; cf. also *Schol. in Luc.* 1.3 [PG 17.313]).

69 *Hom. in Luc.* 1.10 (GCS 35, p. 10).

70 Von Soden, *Die Schriften*, 1.324.

passions is a ‘most excellent Theophilus,’ who is also truly worthy to hear the Gospel.

This prologue easily holds together what ‘For Whom Were Gospels Written?’ consistently dichotomizes – a specific original audience for whom the evangelist wrote, and an indefinite readership of Christians down through the centuries who can emulate his worthiness.

The ubiquitous and prominent presence of such interest in the historical addressees of the gospels in commentarial traditions and ancient canon lists and prologues leaves us with a signal problem. If Richard Bauckham is right, that in the act of their original composition the gospels were all addressed to ‘all Christians’, and all readers until the twentieth century understood this, then why would such complex and elaborate narrative traditions grappling with the historical particularities that occasioned each have even been necessary? Why would early Christian authors introduce hermeneutical problems where there should have been none?⁷¹

(iii) *The theological basis of the unity of the fourfold gospel: the witness of Irenaeus and Origen*

Although never named in Professor Bauckham’s article, surely the spirit of Irenaeus of Lyons hovers over any discussion in which the universal readership of the gospels is championed. His famous defense of the fourfold gospel, it is worth remembering, was offered in response to heretical ‘vain sophists’, who, as Irenaeus characterized them, claimed that:

*apostoli cum hypocrisi fecerunt doctrinam secundum audientium capacitatem et responiones secundum interrogantium suspiciones, caecis [caeca] confabulantes secundum caecitatem ipsorum, languentibus autem secundum languorem eorum et errantibus secundum errorem ipsorum; et putantibus Demiurgum solum esse Deum, hunc adnuntiasse; his uero qui innominabilem Patrem capiunt, per parabolas et aenigmata inenarrabile fecisse mysterium, uti non quemadmodum habet ipsa ueritas, sed et in hypocrisi et quemadmodum capiebat unusquisque, Dominum et apostolos edidisse magisterium.*⁷² (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.5.1)

the apostles hypocritically made their teaching according to the capacity of their hearers and gave answers according to the prejudices of the inquirers, speaking with the blind in terms of their blindness, to the sick in terms of their sickness, to those astray in terms of their wandering; to those who suppose that the Demiurge is the only God they proclaimed him, while to those who accept the unnameable Father they expressed the inexpressible

71 Can one more easily account for a shift toward particular from universal readership than the inverse?

72 Text SC 211/2 (ed. Rousseau and Doutreleau), pp. 54–6; trans. Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (The Early Church Fathers; London/New York: Routledge, 1997) 128.

mystery by parables and enigmas. Thus the Lord and the apostles expressed their teaching not truthfully but hypocritically, as each could hold it.

According to Irenaeus, 'heretical' Christian interpreters were relativizing the teaching of various gospels and other apostolic writings as being 'hypocritically' designed to paliate their intended audiences. This is a thoroughly negative characterization of what in less charged contexts can be recognized as the cardinal rule of ancient rhetorical theory: that what one writes should be *πρέπον*, or 'suitable' to the audience, subject matter, and ethos of oneself as the speaker,⁷³ and, in general, that one creates arguments on the basis of shared principles. The concept of accommodation to audience has a long history in the debate between rhetoric and philosophy, and the way in which an orator should tailor his arguments to the souls of his audiences,⁷⁴ as well as in literary-critical discussions about differentiating historical truth from prevarication.⁷⁵ A more positive expression of the same idea is perhaps found in the enigmatic phrase in the Papias testimony preserved in Eusebius about the preaching of Peter which Mark set down in written form: *ὁς πρὸς τὰς χρείας ἐποιεῖτο τὰς διδασκαλίας*, 'who constructed his teachings with a view to what was needed'.⁷⁶ The former criterion would surface in a different form in patristic hermeneutics in the doctrine of *οἰκονομία* or *συγκατάβασις*, 'accommodation' or 'condescension', whereby God was praised for his prudent decision to communicate gradually over time with human beings who, like a child, only very slowly matured to a point where they could receive the divine mysteries, which were tailored to their meagre abilities.⁷⁷

73 Aristotle famously determined three factors in the persuasive triangulation of a speech: the speaker (*ῥήτορ*), the speech (*λόγος*) and the hearers (*πάθορ*), and devoted most of the second book of his *Ars Rhetorica* to a discussion of the emotions and how the speaker needs to understand each type of disposition and character which a hearer might bring to any discourse (*Rhet.* I.2; II.1–17). See esp. III.7.4 on how appropriate style makes things believable, a standard in rhetorical education echoed closer to NT times by Theon, in his discussion of what is *πρέπον* in a *διήγησις* in Theon, *Prog.* 4 (Spengel 2.84); further discussion and references in Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (HUT 28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 13 n. 46.

74 Most famously, Plato, *Phaedr.* 56.271D–272B (it is important to observe for our discussion of the gospels that Plato has Socrates explicitly include both written and oral arguments).

75 See Origen, *c. Cels.* I.42 (GCS 2, p. 93), on the need to distinguish truth from what should not be trusted since it was written to ingratiate the audience: *καὶ τίσιν ἀπιστήσει ὡς διὰ τὴν πρὸς τινὰς χάριν ἀναγεγραμμένοις* (and discussion of this passage in Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*, 72).

76 I.e. presumably what was needed by the hearers. I leave this point suggestive, however, because it is also possible that *χρεῖται* here refers to the literary form of 'anecdote'. The passage quoted is from *H.E.* III.39.15 (GCS 6.1, p. 292).

77 See Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), and further literature in Margaret M.

Patristic authors who could envision the deity engaging in rhetorical accommodation to the particularities and vagaries of human audiences would not be blind to this dynamic in the (divinely inspired) human authors of the gospels. In this passage, however, the ‘heretics’ are repudiated by Irenaeus for applying such a critique to the gospels – seeing them as occasional documents geared to the ears of select audiences. Whether in reference to geographical locale or epistemological predisposition (expressed by the medical *topos* so common in ancient rhetorical texts), Irenaeus surely gives testimony here of second-century gospel readers who negatively evaluated some gospels as having been directed to a delimited audience in their original composition. Consequently, in his condemnation of this hermeneutical move Irenaeus gives proof that circumscription of audience was being used in the second century as an interpretive principle⁷⁸ (with the purpose, apparently, of discrediting the text in question as unworthy of being a repository of permanent truth for all). These readers (whom he judges heretics) seem to have argued vigorously that the four gospels were not ‘for all Christians’,⁷⁹ and, according to *Adv. Haer.* III.11.7, that was precisely why they chose only a single gospel (Matthew for the Ebionites, Luke for Marcion, Mark for docetists who separated a suffering Jesus from an impassible Christ, and John for Valentinians).

What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that Irenaeus does not do what one might expect if Professor Bauckham were right – he does not try to argue that the four evangelists *did* each write for *all Christians*, such that the heretics have misunderstood this hermeneutical key by their bibliographic narrowness. Irenaeus does not deny but affirms the historical reality that each of the four evangelists had a local or particularized audience in mind. In fact, he confirms

Mitchell, ‘Pauline Accommodation and “Condescension” (συγκατάβασις): 1 Cor 9:19–23 and the History of Influence’, *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 197–214, 298–309. The idea that teachings are tailored to the students, of course, is found already in the NT, as in Mark 4.10–12; 1 Cor 3.1–4; 9.19–23; Heb 5.11–14.

78 As Robert M. Grant has shown, often it was ‘heretics’ who were at the forefront of employing standard ancient literary critical tools in the interpretation of the Christian scriptures (*Heresy and Criticism: The Search for Authenticity in Early Christian Literature* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993]).

79 Compare also Tertullian, *de Praescr. Haer.* 22.2: ‘They [the heretics] are accustomed to say that the apostles did not know everything; [then] driven by the same foolishness they turn themselves back around again to the contrary – that the apostles knew everything, *but they did not hand everything on to everyone*. In both directions they are casting blame on Christ, who sent out apostles who were either too poorly educated or too short on honesty’ (*Solent dicere non omnia apostolos scisse, eadem agitati dementia qua susum rursus conuertunt, omnia quidem apostolos scisse sed non omnia omnibus tradidisse, in utroque Christum reprehensioni incipientes qui aut minus instructos aut parum simplices apostolos miserit* [CCSL 1.203]).

that reality unquestioningly by citing the earlier traditions himself. But Irenaeus deliberately chooses to make his argument for their overarching unity in the *divine origin* of the gospel, and the *divine* (not human!) intention for the fourfold gospel to be the repository of truth for all Christians:

*omnes pariter et singuli eorum habentes Euangelium Dei. Ita Matthaeus in Hebraeis ipsorum lingua scripturam edidit Euangelii, cum Petrus et Paulus Romae euangelizarent et fundarent Ecclesiam. Post uero horum excessum, Marcus discipulus et interpres Petri et ipse quae a Petro adnuntiata erant per scripta nobis tradidit. Et Lucas autem sectator Pauli quod ab illo praedicabatur Euangelium in libro condidit. Postea et Iohannes discipulus Domini, qui et supra pectus eius recumbebat, et ipse edidit Euangelium, Ephesi Asiae commorans.*⁸⁰ (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.1.1).

Collectively and individually they had the Gospel of God. Thus Matthew published among the Hebrews a gospel written in their language, at the time when Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and founding the church there. After their death Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself delivered to us⁸¹ in writing what had been announced by Peter. Luke, the follower of Paul, put down in a book the Gospel preached by him. Later John, the Lord's disciple, who reclined on his bosom (John 13.23; 21.20), himself published the Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia.

Irenaeus's point is indeed that behind and within the four gospels is a single 'gospel of God'. But his defense that the gospels provide universal truth for all Christians is an overtly theological, not an historical, claim. Would he have had to make that theological argument if in fact each gospel had, already from its original publication, had a secure place and universal readership throughout the world?⁸² That Irenaeus presumes the varied localities of the four gospels seems the necessary precondition for his famous cosmological argument for the unity of the fourfold gospel in the four regions of the world, the four winds, and the four columns of the gospels. Does not the metaphor of the four pillars depend upon their geographical distance for it to work?

Neque autem plura numero quam haec sunt neque rursus pauciora capit esse Euangelia. Quoniam enim quattuor regiones mundi sunt in quo sumus et quattuor principales spiritus et disseminata est Ecclesia super omnem terram, columna autem et firmamentum Ecclesiae est Euangelium et

⁸⁰ Text SC 211/2, pp. 22–4; translation Grant, *Irenaeus*, 124.

⁸¹ Irenaeus may be including himself in the Roman audience here. See Grant, *Irenaeus*, 32, on how this is part of the Bishop of Lyons's attempt to establish the ancient foundation of the church at Rome.

⁸² See Oscar Cullmann, 'The Plurality of the Gospels as a Theological Problem in Antiquity', *The Early Church* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins; London: SCM, 1956) 39–54, 45–8, on how the exclusive use of one gospel in different areas was a factor in both the problem and the solution of the fourfold gospel. Cullmann was, however, rather critical of Irenaeus' solution: 'the way Irenaeus solved the problem was precisely the way it ought not to have been solved' (51)!

*Spiritus uitae, consequens est quattuor habere eam columnas undique flantes incorruptibilitatem et uiuificantes homines.*⁸³ (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.8).

There cannot be either more or fewer gospels than there are. Since there are four regions of the world in which we exist, and four principal winds, and since the church, spread out over all the world, has for a column and support [1 Tim. 3.15] the Gospel and the Spirit of life, consequently it has four columns, from all sides breathing imperishability and making men live.

The famous Irenaean formulation locates the universality of the gospels *not* in their common original audience (‘all Christians’) but, rather, in the divine plan to bring unity through diversity. As a consequence, because it is a polemical argument, Irenaeus’s formulation – which we should expect would most back Bauckham’s appeal to ‘the way the gospels have always been read ever since [they were written]’ (47) – actually tells against that thesis, for in order to account for the considerable energies Irenaeus exerts to argue for the single yet fourfold gospel, one must posit that their original intention was from early on thwarted, at least to the extent that Irenaeus had to try to revive and claim that original intention in the face of vigorous alternatives. But this would seem to run aground of Professor Bauckham’s wish to argue that the gospels were *always* read as directed toward a universal, open-ended Christian audience – that is, up until redaction-critical impulse took hold. Can Professor Bauckham’s thesis promote the essential historicity of the Irenaean evangelistic hermeneutic as generally held throughout the history of interpretation of the gospels without having somehow to explain why it appears in an apologetic context in response to competing, divergent reading strategies of prescribed audiences already in the second century?

Irenaeus focused on the places where (two of) the gospels were written, but not necessarily the people to whom they were addressed. Origen, who is on the same trajectory as Irenaeus, does so overtly. In a fragment from his Matthew commentary preserved in Eusebius, Origen is said to have recounted the ‘tradition’ about the origins of the gospels in this way:

ὡς ἐν παραδόσει μαθὼν περὶ τῶν τεσσάρων εὐαγγελίων, ἃ καὶ μόνα ἀναντίρρητά ἐστιν ἐν τῇ ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὅτι πρῶτον μὲν γέγραπται τὸ κατὰ τὸν ποτε τελῶνην, ὕστερον δὲ ἀπόστολον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ Ματθαῖον, ἐκδεδοκότα αὐτὸ τοῖς ἀπὸ Ἰουδαϊσμοῦ πιστεύουσιν, γράμμασιν Ἑβραϊκοῖς συντεταγμένον· δεύτερον δὲ τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον, ὡς Πέτρος ὑφήγησατο αὐτῷ, ποιήσαντα, ὃν καὶ υἷὸν ἐν τῇ καθολικῇ ἐπιστολῇ διὰ τούτων ὁμολόγησεν φάσκων "ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς ἡ ἐν Βαβυλῶνι συνεκλεκτὴ καὶ Μάρκος ὁ υἱὸς μου"· καὶ τρίτον τὸ κατὰ Λουκᾶν, τὸ ὑπὸ Παύλου ἐπαινούμενον εὐαγγέλιον τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν ἐθνῶν

83 Text SC 211/2, pp. 160–2; translation Grant, *Irenaeus*, 131.

πεποιηκότα ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην.⁸⁴ (Origen, *Frag. Ex comm. in Mt.* 1.1–20)

... as I had learned in the tradition about the four gospels, which alone are irrefutable in the church of God under heaven, that first was written the [gospel] according to him who was once a tax collector, but later an apostle of Jesus Christ, Matthew, who had published it, composed in Hebrew letters, for the people from Judaism who had come to believe. Second [was written] the gospel according to Mark, who acted as Peter had instructed him, whom he acknowledged even as his son in the catholic epistle saying in these words: ‘the elect one in Babylon and Mark my son greet you’ [1 Pet 5.13]. And third, that according to Luke, the gospel praised by Paul [2 Cor 8.18], having composed it for the people from the Gentiles. And after all these was written the gospel according to John.

Origen appears to make the inference Bauckham reserves for modern redaction critics, i.e. that evangelists wrote for the circumscribed audiences corresponding to the places where they composed their works: Matthew for Jewish believers and Luke for Gentiles. A similar assumption lies behind his explanation of why the author of the Fourth Gospel provided a translation of the name ‘Thomas’ in 20.24: that it would be especially meaningful to his Greek-speaking audience.⁸⁵

Although we can cite a few such examples (enough to undermine Professor Bauckham’s broad assertion of their non-existence), it remains the case that appeals to the interpretive significance of the original audiences are rare for Origen. But even that does not quite make him an ally of Bauckham’s position. For Origen, the rarity of appeal to the historical circumstance of the composition of the gospels depends upon a *theological* judgment about its limited relevance for the meaning of the text, given that the scriptures are really the product of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶ Indeed, it is precisely because of his theological method and commitments that Origen cannot press too strongly the historical particularity of each evangelist: ‘To lay more stress on the creativity of the evangelists as historians would have meant that he could not pass so easily from literal truth or untruth to allegory. He would have had to abandon the rhetorical foundation of the

84 = Eusebius *H.E.* VI.25.4–6 (GCS 92, p. 576; see also Aland, *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum*, 540).

85 εἶποι δ’ ἂν τις καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν ἐρμηνείαν μόνου τούτου ἀναγεγράφθαι, τῷ βεβουλήσθαι τὸν εὐαγγελιστὴν Ἑλληνας ἐντυγχάνοντας τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ ἐπιστήσαι τῇ ιδιότητι τῆς ἐρμηνείας τοῦ ὀνόματος κατ’ ἐξοχὴν μόνον ἐρμηνευθέντος ἐπὶ τῷ εὐρεῖν τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦ καὶ Ἑλληνιστὶ ἐκκεῖσθαι τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ (*Frag. in Jo.* 106 [GCS 10, p. 562]: ‘Someone might say that the translation of only this man’s name has been recorded because the evangelist had wished Greeks reading the gospel to comprehend the unique meaning of this name, which alone was translated as beyond compare, when they find the reason his name was set forth this way in Greek, too’).

86 See valuable discussion in Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*.

allegorical method.⁸⁷ But neither does Origen forsake or repudiate the traditions about the original historical contexts of the gospels, as we have seen. Hence, even where one might be able to claim some consonance in early gospel interpretation for the view that the gospels address ‘all Christians’, as in Irenaeus and Origen, they actually do not prove Professor Bauckham’s essential point, for they are not making an argument in kind, one based on the same kinds of warrants for an historical claim. But perhaps most importantly, what Origen seeks to do is precisely the opposite of Bauckham – rather than *dichotomize* the audiences of the gospels (either local or universal), Origen seeks to hold the two together, even when it requires contradiction, or at least unrelieved paradox.

(iv) *The post-Constantinian church*

One might imagine that it was especially after the church became enfranchised in the Empire that the universal readership of the gospels from the beginning might have been claimed, but instead there remains an untroubled insistence on local origins. A quite concrete and specific example is to be found in one of the poems of Gregory of Nazianzus, *de veris scripturae libris*.⁸⁸ In enumerating the number of books of the νεὸν μυστήριον, ‘new mystery’ (after cataloguing those of the OT), Gregory departs from his custom elsewhere in this canonical list in order to identify the four gospels not only by the names of their authors, but also by their addressees:

Ματθαῖος μὲν ἔγραψεν Ἑβραίοις θαύματα Χριστοῦ,
Μάρκος δ’ Ἰταλίῃ, Λουκᾶς Ἀχαιΐάδι,
Πᾶσι δ’ Ἰωάννης, κήρυξ μέγας, οὐρανοφίτης.

Matthew wrote the marvels of Christ for the Hebrews,
Mark for Italy, Luke for Achaia,
But John, the great herald, the heaven-wanderer,
wrote for all.⁸⁹ (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carm.* 1.12.6–9)

This poetic piece provides remarkable counter-testimony to the claim that ‘without exception’ ancient writers did not read the gospels by reference to their original, local audiences. Gregory emphatically does not ascribe to the four works an identical set of intended readers, nor, notably, does he (as with other ancient witnesses) perceive any difficulty in coalescing the place in which a gospel was written and the persons to whom it was addressed.⁹⁰ This is confirmed in the series

87 *Ibid.*, 59.

88 It serves as the epigram of the present essay.

89 PG 37.474.

90 Even in this first poem there is an easy shift from persons (‘to Hebrews’, for Matthew), to place (‘in Italy’, ‘in Achaia’, for Mark and Luke), and back to persons (‘for all’ for John). The dative case, used with Mark and Luke, can of course mean either ‘in’ or ‘to’; for Gregory I doubt this poses a real difference.

of poems that follow up on these lines, where the *θαύματα* of each gospel are spelled out. With complete ease of parallelism Gregory replaces the referent 'Italy' with 'Italians' as the intended recipients of Mark's miracle accounts: Μάρκος δ' Αὐσονίοισι θεοῦ τάδε θαύματ' ἔγραψε.⁹¹ Surely the poetic medium would hardly have been the place for Gregory to introduce some innovation in biblical interpretation. The view of the gospels enshrined in this poem is part and parcel of Gregory's acceptance of the common lore about the distribution of the nations and cities of the world among the apostles, so that 'let Peter have Judea, Paul common cause for the Gentiles, Luke to Achaia, Andrew to Asia, John to Ephesus, Thomas to India, Mark to Italy'.⁹² Here universality is achieved, yet not through an 'all gospels to all' evangelistic strategy, but by a compartmentalization of the known world seen as missionary territory (a picture clearly rooted in Gal 2.7–9). While Gregory is the first patristic witness we have seen who uses language at all like Bauckham's (a gospel written 'for all'), he actually provides outright disconfirmation of Bauckham's thesis because, most significantly, he limits that honor to John's gospel⁹³ in contradistinction to the other three.⁹⁴ And, by the geographical

91 *Carm* I.21.2 (PG 37.491). Gregory replaces 'in/for Achaia' with . . . Λουκᾶς δ' Ἑλλάδι σεπτὰ θεοῦ τάδε θαύματ' ἔγραψε (*Carm*. I.22.2 [PG 37.492]). Because of the parallelism with the Markan formulation, the dative here is more likely 'he wrote for Greece', but once again Gregory obviously presumes that place of composition and readers are synonymous.

92 Gregory of Nazianzus, *contra Arianos et de seipso* (= *Or.* 33) 11 (PG 36.228): Ἐστω Πέτρον ἢ Ἰουδαία· τι Παύλῳ κοινὸν πρὸς τὰ ἔθνη, Λουκᾷ πρὸς Ἀχάϊαν, Ἀνδρέα πρὸς τὴν Ἥπειρον, Ἰωάννη πρὸς Ἔφεσον, Θωμᾷ πρὸς Ἰνδικὴν, Μάρκῳ πρὸς Ἰταλίαν.

93 In accord with this is the special honor Eusebius gives to the Fourth Gospel: καὶ δὴ τὸ κατ' αὐτὸν [sc. Ἰωάννην] εὐαγγέλιον ταῖς ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν διεγνωσμένον ἐκκλησίαις, πρῶτον ἀνωμολογήσθω (*H.E.* III.24.2 [GCS 6.1, p. 244]).

94 Another passage, from Gregory's famous funeral oration for Basil, may also be relevant here. To defend Basil's writings against misrepresentation by those who try to infer his complete Trinitarian outlook from any single passage, his encomiast Gregory argues that it is imperative for one to engage Basil's literary legacy with the fundamental literary-critical method of τὸν τῶν γεγραμμένων νοῦν δοκιμάζοντες καὶ τὸν σκοπὸν ἀφ' οὗ οὗ ταῦτα ἐγράφετο ('carefully examining the intention of the things he wrote and the goal for which he wrote them'). Gregory finds an illustration of precisely this methodological and substantive point in the gospel writers: Οὐδὲ γὰρ τοὺς εὐαγγελιστὰς φαίμεν ἂν ὑπεναντία ποιεῖν ἀλλήλοις, ὅτι οἱ μὲν τῷ σαρκικῷ τοῦ Χριστοῦ πλέον ἐνησχολήθησαν, οἱ δὲ τῇ θεολογίᾳ προσέβησαν· καὶ οἱ μὲν ἐκ τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς, οἱ δὲ ἐκ τῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ἐποίησαν τὴν ἀρχὴν· οὕτω τὸ κήρυγμα διελόμενοι πρὸς τὸ χρησίμων οἶμαι τοῖς δεχομένοις, καὶ οὕτω παρὰ τοῦ ἐν αὐτοῖς τυπούμενοι Πνεύματος ('Nor would we say that the evangelists acted contrary to one another because some were more occupied with the fleshly existence of Christ, and others scaled the heights of his divinity, and some took their beginning from matters akin to us, and others from those above us. For I suppose they were dividing the proclamation among themselves in this way with a view to the advantage of those receiving it, and were so disposed by the spirit which was in them') (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 43.69 [text SC 384.280–2]).

epithet he applies to this evangelist, οὐρανοφοίτης,⁹⁵ Gregory seems suggestively to imply that it is only from a heavenly vantage point that one could write ‘for all’.

(v) *Exegetical use of local audience traditions*

Is there further evidence that these well-attested early (and later) Christian traditions about the specific, rather than general or universal, audiences of each gospel at the hand of its evangelist were ‘hermeneutically relevant’ (44) for the earliest interpreters? I have already argued that the ubiquitous placement of these traditions in positions of prominence in codexes would alone seem to force that conclusion; at the very least, the repetition and pedagogical highlighting of these connections can hardly be ignored in any judgment about patristic gospel exegesis. But is there further concrete evidence that anyone drew on these traditions about originally circumscribed readers to interpret passages in the gospels in the early church? While redaction criticism of a modern sort was not a widely practiced patristic method, chiefly because patristic authors believed the Holy Spirit was the actual author of Scripture, with the result that appeal to the divine author was more the norm,⁹⁶ there are in fact cases where a patristic author appeals to the intention of an evangelist to write in such a way that his circumscribed audience would be persuaded.

The main example I would like to offer for discussion is from the Antiochene John Chrysostom. In order to represent accurately the tensive quality of patristic gospel interpretation (because my purpose here is to challenge the simple dichotomy between universal and particular audiences, rather than to champion the latter over the former) it is important to give the full context. Chrysostom begins his Matthew commentary by saying that Scripture should not have been necessary at all, but it was written as a concession to the human inability to hear the Spirit dwelling in human hearts. When he turns to the gospels themselves, John explains that the fourfold gospel was due to *χρεία*, need:

Καὶ τί δῆποτε τοσούτων ὄντων τῶν μαθητῶν, δύο γράφουσιν ἐκ τῶν ἀποστόλων μόνοι, καὶ δύο ἐκ τῶν τούτοις ἀκολουθῶν; Ὁ μὲν γὰρ Παύλου, ὁ δὲ Πέτρου μαθητῆς ὢν, μετὰ Ἰωάννου καὶ Ματθαίου τὰ Εὐαγγέλια ἔγραψαν. Ὅτι οὐδὲν πρὸς φιλοτιμίαν ἐποίουν, ἀλλὰ πάντα πρὸς χρείαν. Τί οὖν; Οὐκ ἤρκει εἰς εὐαγγελιστῆς πάντα εἰπεῖν; Ἦρκει μὲν· ἀλλὰ κἄν τέσσαρες ὄσιν οἱ γράφοντες, μήτε κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς καιροὺς, μήτε ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς τόποις, μήτε συνελθόντες καὶ διαλεχθέντες ἀλλήλοις, εἶτα ὥσπερ ἀφ’ ἑνὸς στόματος πάντα φθέγγονται μεγίστη τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπόδειξις τοῦτο γίνεται. (Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt.* 1.2 [57.16])

95 This emphasis is also implied in the shift in word order for the last colon, which highlights the *pāsi*.

96 See Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*, 54: ‘Because of this emphasis on inspiration, Origen does not find the historical circumstances of the various evangelists especially meaningful.’

Then why is it that although there were so many disciples at that time, only two of the apostles wrote gospels, and two were written by followers of apostles? For, one a disciple of Paul [Luke] and the other a disciple of Peter [Mark] wrote the gospels along with John and Matthew. Because they did nothing with an eye to personal glory, but did everything with an eye on what was needed. Why then? Was not one evangelist sufficient to tell everything? Yes, it was. But if there are four who write, yet neither at the same times nor in the same places, without having come together or conversed with one another, and still they tell everything as though from a single mouth – this is the greatest proof of the truth.

John shares with most patristic interpreters the wish to secure the unified testimony of the gospels despite their ‘minor differences’ (as he terms them),⁹⁷ but in this opening homily of his series on Matthew he turns that argument around for apologetic benefit, arguing that those very variances demonstrate the independence of the accounts, while the substantial overlap proves their truthfulness. Chrysostom’s argument for completely independent authorship of the four depends upon his tacit assumption (stated as though it required no further proof) that the gospels were each written in a different time and place. Later in this same homily he will give an illustration of how the principle of specific audience can be used by a patristic author as an exegetical expedient. But the Antiochene first introduces the question (customarily treated in the first homily or a prefaced *ὑπόθεσις*) of the *αἰτίαι* ‘occasions’, of the gospels. Luke, he says, declares his literary aim in the address to Theophilus in 1.4; John, however, did not declare his purpose outright, but it is clear from his whole gospel that John writes to be sure the teachings about the divinity of Christ (*τὰ τῆς θεότητος δόγματα*) not be sub-merged, as in the other three.⁹⁸ Then Chrysostom turns to Matthew, and repeats a version of the tradition that goes back at least to Papias:

Λέγεται δὲ καὶ Ματθαῖος, τῶν ἐξ Ἰουδαίων πιστευσάντων προσελθόντων αὐτῷ καὶ παρακαλεσάντων, ἅπερ εἶπε διὰ ῥημάτων, ταῦτα ἀφείναι διὰ γραμμάτων αὐτοῖς, καὶ τῇ τῶν Ἑβραίων φωνῇ συνθεῖναι τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον· καὶ Μάρκος δὲ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ, τῶν μαθητῶν παρακαλεσάντων, αὐτὸ τοῦτο ποιῆσαι. Διὰ δὴ τοῦτο ὁ μὲν Ματθαῖος, ἅτε Ἑβραίοις γράφων, οὐδὲν πλέον ἐζήτησε δεῖξαι, ἢ ὅτι ἀπὸ Ἀβραάμ καὶ Δαυῖδ ἦν. Ὁ δὲ Λουκᾶς,

97 See the many illustrations and trenchant analyses of the various means by which they do this in Merkel, *Widersprüche*.

98 John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt.* 1.3 (PG 57.17): ‘Ὁ μὲν οὖν Λουκᾶς καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν φησὶ, δι’ ἣν ἐπὶ τὸ γράφειν ἔρχεται: “Ἴνα ἔχῃς γὰρ, φησὶ, περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν· τουτέστιν, Ἴνα συνεχῶς ὑπομνησκόμενος τὴν ἀσφάλειαν ἔχῃς, καὶ ἐν ἀσφαλείᾳ μένῃς. Ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης αὐτὸς μὲν ἐσίγησε τὴν αἰτίαν (‘Now Luke tells even the reason on account of which he comes to write: “so that you might possess security about the things of which you were instructed.” That is, “so that you might continually have the security in remembrance, and might remain in it.” But as for John, he was himself silent about his reason for writing’).

ἄτε κοινῇ πᾶσι διαλεγόμενος, καὶ ἀνωτέρω τὸν λόγον ἀνάγει, μέχρι τοῦ Ἀδάμ προΐών. Καὶ ὁ μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς γενέσεως ἄρχεται· οὐδὲν γὰρ οὕτως ἀνέπαυε τὸν Ἰουδαῖον, ὡς τὸ μαθεῖν αὐτὸν, ὅτι τοῦ Ἀβραάμ καὶ τοῦ Δαυΐδ ἔγγονος ἦν ὁ Χριστός· ὁ δὲ οὐχ οὕτως, ἀλλ’ ἐτέρων πλείονων μέμνηται πραγμάτων, καὶ τότε ἐπὶ τὴν γενεαλογίαν πρόεισι. (Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt.* 1.3 [57.17])

Now it is said that even Matthew, after those from among the Jews who had come to believe approached him and requested it, left for them in writing the things which he had said orally, and composed the gospel in the language of the Hebrews. And Mark did this very thing in Egypt,⁹⁹ when the disciples requested him to. Indeed, it is for this reason that Matthew, for his part, inasmuch as he was writing for Hebrews, sought to prove nothing more than that Christ came from Abraham and David, whereas Luke, inasmuch as he was writing for all in Koine Greek, tells the story going further back, extending all the way to Adam. Hence Matthew begins from the genealogy – for nothing so calms the Jew as for him to learn that Christ was a descendant of Abraham and David. However, Luke doesn’t begin in this way, but makes mention of many other things, and then introduces the genealogy.

Here we have the now-familiar pattern of the audience request tradition. This passage is especially important to our present discussion because the original addressees of a gospel (thus identified) are invoked as an explanation of an exegetical problem – the notorious case¹⁰⁰ of the divergent genealogies. Chrysostom’s treatment of Matthew’s genealogy surely qualifies as a reading based on a prescribed readership such as Bauckham has claimed only arises in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries.¹⁰¹ Chrysostom is not a singular witness to

- 99 Swete, *Mark*, xxxix, in regard to this ascription of Mark to Alexandria (rather than Rome), calls it an ‘error [that] has possibly arisen from the statement of Eusebius (*H.E.* II.16)’.
- 100 Many examples of both non-Christian critique and patristic defense of the variations between the gospel genealogies (and lack thereof) are cited throughout Merkel, *Widersprüche*; see also John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 28 (Celsus), 136–7 (Porphyry), 289 (Julian).
- 101 A work falsely attributed to John Chrysostom, the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaëum*, was, in a Latin version said to be a translation by Burgundio of Pisa, one of the most ubiquitously cited and honored patristic exegetical legacies for the Middle Ages (Madigan, *Olivi and the Interpretation of Matthew*, 177 n. 57; the work may have been composed in Latin by an Arian commentator of the fifth century). It begins by situating Matthew’s gospel in Judea, addressed to Jews, but this time Matthew is contrasted with John’s gospel, explained as having been written with an eye to convincing Gentiles: *Et quare Joannes statim in principio Evangelii sui divinitatis ejus monstravit naturam dicens . . . [quotation of 1.1]? Quoniam Joannes, inter gentes in exilio constitutus, Graeco sermone Evangelium causa gentium scripsit. quae non cognoscebant si Deus Filium habet, aut quomodo genitum habet: idcirco superfluum erat primum incarnationis ejus mysterium gentibus demonstrare, cum illum ipsi quis esset nescirent . . . Matthaëus autem Evangelium Judaeis Hebraico sermone conscripsit, sicut*

this interpretive move, either, for Origen had already included a version of it in his treatment of the inconsistencies in the openings of the four gospels.¹⁰² Although Luke's gospel is said in this passage to be written 'for all', Chrysostom is not offering that as a rule generalizable to all the gospels, but a way to render Luke the precise counterpart to Matthew, so as to maintain another specific exegetical point about that work (Christ's genealogical descent from Adam).

However, having demonstrated that a patristic author *could* (in some circumstances) make an appeal to a definite intended readership of a gospel, we must also appreciate that this was not necessarily John's usual hermeneutical rule or guide, as he is soon to state directly:

Ἐνθα μὲν οὖν ἕκαστος διατρίβων ἔγραψεν, οὐ σφόδρα ἡμῖν δεῖ ἰσχυρίσασθαι· ὅτι δὲ οὐ κατ' ἀλλήλων ἔστησαν, τοῦτο διὰ πάσης τῆς πραγματείας πειρασόμεθα ἀποδείξει. (Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt.* 1.4 [PG 57.18])

jam diximus supra, ut Judaei legentes aedificarentur in fide ... (Opus imperf. in Mt. Prologue [PG 56.612]: 'And why did John immediately point out the nature of his divinity by saying in the opening of his gospel ... [quotation of 1.1]? Because John, situated in exile among Gentiles wrote [his] Gospel in the Greek language for the sake of the Gentiles. Since they were ignorant about whether God had a son, or in what way he had offspring, for that reason it would have been superfluous to show the Gentiles first the mystery of his incarnation, when they themselves did not even know who he was ... But Matthew, on the other hand, wrote [his] Gospel for Jews in the Hebrew language, as I already stated above, in order that Jews be built up in faith by reading it').

102 Origen, *Comm. in Jo.* 1.4.22 (GCS 10, p. 8): Ματθαῖος μὲν γὰρ τοῖς προσδοκῶσι τὸν ἐξ Ἀβραάμ καὶ Δαβὶδ Ἑβραίοις γράφων: "βίβλος, φησί, γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, υἱοῦ Δαβίδ, υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ" ("Matthew, for his part, writing for the Hebrews who were expecting the one descended from Abraham and David said, "the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham"). Merkel, *Widersprüche*, 109–11, treats solutions Origen propounds for the problem of the diversity in the genealogies under the title 'Redaktionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungsweise'. He does not discuss our passage, but includes others, such as the following, in which Origen appeals to the literary-theological intention or plan of the individual evangelists: Καὶ ὁ μὲν Ματθαῖος οὐ τὸν βαπτιζόμενον γενεαλογεῖ, ἀλλὰ τὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενον· Λουκᾶς δὲ γενεαλογῶν οὐ κατάγει τὴν γενεαλογίαν, ἀλλ' ἀνάγει ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὸν θεὸν τὸν βαπτιζόμενον. Καὶ οὐ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ἢ κατάβασις τῆς γενεαλογίας καὶ ἡ ἀνάβασις. Ὁ μὲν γὰρ καταβιβάζων τῷ λόγῳ καταβιβάξει αὐτὸν καὶ διὰ γυναικῶν ἀμαρτωλῶν, μόνας ἀναγράφας τὰς ἐπιληψίμους, ὁ δὲ γενεαλογῶν τὸν βαπτιζόμενον γυναῖκα οὐκ ὀνομάζει ἐν τῇ γενεαλογίᾳ αὐτοῦ ("Matthew for his part gives a genealogy not of the baptized one, but the one coming into the world, whereas Luke when writing a genealogy does not trace the genealogy in a descending fashion but ascending from the one being baptized back to God himself. And the genealogy that descends through the generations and that which ascends do not pass through the same route. For the former, giving his descent by word, has him descend even through sinful women, recounting only the reprehensible, whereas the latter, in giving the genealogy of the baptized one, does not name a woman in his genealogy") (*Hom. in Luc.* 28.161–2 [GCS 35, p. 173]).

Where each [Matthew and Luke] was living when he wrote is not necessary for us to claim with obstinacy. But that they did not stand opposed to one another – this is what we shall try to demonstrate through this understanding [the homily series].

Yet the fact that Chrysostom feels he must name this issue (even if to deflect it) is a reflection of his training in the literary-critical tools of his day, which provided a rather clear menu of topics by which to nail down a *specific* rather than an indefinite occasion upon which a text was composed.¹⁰³ But even as an historically attuned Antiochene, John continually tacks between the original audience of a text (such as the Pauline letters) and the readers of his own day, finding both addressed.¹⁰⁴ He applies that same hermeneutic to the gospels,¹⁰⁵ with the further narrative complexity afforded by the gospels’ own depiction of the original hearers of the words of Christ. The hermeneutics of contemporaneity in patristic exegesis, and the all-important fact that much patristic interpretation is homiletical, naturally inclines Chrysostom far more to the side of the current reader than the ‘original’ reader, which is what makes the infrequent glimpses of the other, more historical, virtually redaction-critical hermeneutic all the more surprising.¹⁰⁶

103 This can be seen especially in the list of exegetical topics with which John begins his set of homilies on the opening to the Acts of the Apostles: Δεῖ τοίνυν ἐξετάσαι, τίς ὁ γράψας, καὶ πότε ἔγραψε, καὶ περὶ τίνων, καὶ τίνος ἔνεκεν τῇ ἐορτῇ ταύτῃ νενομοθέτηται αὐτὸ ἀναγινώσκεσθαι. Τάχα γὰρ οὐκ ἀκούετε διὰ παντὸς τοῦ ἔτους ἀναγινωσκομένου τοῦ βιβλίου. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο χρήσιμον· καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ζητῆσαι χρῆ, τίνος ἔνεκεν ταύτην ἔχει τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν, Πράξεις ἀποστόλων (Chrysostom, in *Princ. Ac.* 1.3 [PG 51.71]: ‘So indeed it is necessary to investigate who is the person who wrote, and when did he write, and concerning whom/what things, and for what reason it has been ordained that it be read on this feast. For perhaps you do not hear the book read through the entire year. And this, too, is useful; as well, after this it is necessary to investigate why it has this title, “Acts of the Apostles”’).

104 See Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (HUT 40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000/Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), esp. 389–94, for such statements as: Οὐ πρὸς Ἐφεσίους ταῦτα εἴρηται μόνον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς ὑμᾶς νῦν λέγεται (‘Not to the Ephesians alone have these words been said, but they are being said now to you’) (*Hom. in Eph.* 13.1 [PG 62.93]); Μᾶλλον δὲ ἂ πρὸς τούτους λέγει, πρὸς πάντας λέγει (‘But rather the things he says to them he says to all’) (*Hom. in Col.* 10.1 [PG 62.365]).

105 Of hundreds of examples, see, e.g., *Comm. in Mt.* 1.6 [PG 57.20]: Καὶ γὰρ πολιτείαν ἔγραψαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἄλιεῖς (‘the fishermen wrote for us also the way of life’), even as he switches bearings among the historical evangelist and Christ, God, or the Spirit as the author (Οὐ γὰρ αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ τὴν πολιτείαν νομοθετήσαντος Χριστοῦ πάντα ἐστὶ τὰ λεγόμενα [‘for all the things said do not belong to him (the author), but to Christ who legislated the way of life’] [*ibid.*]).

106 John’s earlier contemporary Julian, absent such homiletical concern (!), effortlessly harnesses an historical reading to his invective by stigmatizing Matthew’s use of Hosea 11.1 in 2.15 as the evangelist’s cunning attempt to deceive his intended audience of *Gentile Christians*, who would not know the Hebrew Scriptures well enough to recognize that the

A final example, from Chrysostom's exegesis of the Gospel according to John as preserved in the catenae, will give further illustration of the way he held universality and particularity in a deliberate theological and rhetorical tension:

Εἰ μὲν Ἰωάννης ἡμῖν ἔμελλε διαλέγεσθαι καὶ τὰ αὐτοῦ ἐρεῖν, ἀναγκαῖον ἦν καὶ γένος αὐτοῦ καὶ πατρίδα εἰπεῖν καὶ ἀνατροφὴν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ οὐχ οὗτος, ἀλλ' ὁ Θεὸς δι' αὐτοῦ φθέγγεται, περιττόν ἐστι ταῦτα ἀναζητεῖν. ἔστι δὲ πατρίδος μὲν ἦτοι κώμης εὐτελοῦς· ἀπὸ Βηθσαιῶν τῆς Γαλιλαίας· πατὴρ δὲ ἀλιέως καὶ πένητος· παιδείας δὲ τῆς ἔξωθεν οὐδ' ὅτιοῦν αὐτῷ μετῆν· καὶ γοῦν μαρτυρεῖ Λουκᾶς ὅτι οὐ μόνον ἰδιώτης ἦν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀγράμματος. Οὗτος ὁ ἀλιεὺς ὁ ἀπὸ Βηθσαιῶν τῆς Γαλιλαίας, ὁ πατὴρ ἀλιέως, ὁ ἰδιώτης ἰδιωτῶν τὴν ἐσχάτην, ὁ γράμματα μὴ μαθὼν, μήτε πρότερον μήθ' ὕστερον, μετὰ τὸ συγγενέσθαι Χριστῷ, ταύτην φθέγγεται τὴν συγγραφὴν. Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ μετὰ τὸν τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἡμῶν σταυρὸν καὶ τὴν εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀνοδὸν, ψευδοδιδάσκαλοι τινες ἔφασαν τὸν αἶδιον τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγον τότε πρῶτον κεκληῖσθαι πατὴρ ὑπαρξιν, ὅτε καὶ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τῆς ἀγίας ἐτέχθη παρθένου· συναχθέντες τῶν πιστευσάντων οἱ νουνεχέστεροι, πρὸς τὸν τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἀφίκοντο μαθητὴν Ἰωάννην τὸν τοῦ Ζεβεδαίου, καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ἀπήγγελλον νόσον· ὃς τοῦτο ἀκούσας, εὐθέως ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ παρόντος ἔδραμε συγγραφὴν, ἀνατρέπων τὴν τῶν ψευδοδιδασκάλων ψευδοδοξίαν.¹⁰⁷ (Chrysostom, *Catena in Joh.*)

If it were John who was going to describe and tell us things that were his own, then it would be necessary to tell of his family and his homeland and upbringing. But since it is not he, but God speaking through him, it is superfluous to search out these things. But he is of a homeland that is a poor village, from Bethsaida of Galilee, and his father was a fisherman and poor. And he certainly did not partake at all of 'pagan' education. Indeed Luke testifies that not only was he uneducated, but even illiterate. So it was this fisherman from Bethsaida of Galilee, the son of a fisherman, an uneducated man with the last level of education, one who did not know letters, neither previously nor subsequently, who gives voice to this composition after being with Christ. For, since after the crucifixion of our savior and his ascent into heaven, some false teachers said that the eternal Word of God was first called 'the being of the father' at the moment of his birth as a human being through the holy virgin, the more intelligent of the believers, after gathering together, approached the Savior's disciple John, the son of Zebedee, and were reporting this sort of malady. When he heard it, immediately he hastened upon the composition presently before us, to overturn the false teaching of the false teachers.

referent is patently not Christ, but Israel (Julian, *c. Gal. frag.* 101 = Jerome, *Comm. in Osee* 3.11; see discussion in Cook, *Interpretation*, 290–1). This characterization of the audience of Matthew's gospel in particular is of course a perfect projection of Julian's own designation of Christians as 'Galileans', uneducated boobs who have gullibly been deceived (Cook, *Interpretation*, 292). Presumably Julian thought other, Jewish-Christians (and Jews), would not have been so easily duped.

107 J. A. Cramer, *Catena Graecorum patrum in Novum Testamentum* (2 vols; Oxford: Oxford University, 1841; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1967) 2.178, lines 4–22.

John’s gospel, according to this exegetical preamble, was not written ‘for all Christians’ in some general or indefinite sense, but at a very particular time to a clearly defined community of people who sought his intervention. The historical anachronism of Chrysostom’s invocation of Arianism does not affect the value of this late fourth-century text as testimony that patristic interpreters were fully able to envision specific audiences – even if larger than a single church – addressed by individual gospels. Chrysostom here combines the human and divine authorship of the gospel without fear of self-contradiction, together with a particular audience who asked for this text, and his ready assumption that it contains divine truths of eternal applicability even or especially for his own late fourth-century Antiochene auditors and later generations who might be affected by the christological heresies the evangelist John so effectively combated.

(vi) *Exegesis and esoterica*

Heresiological explanations of the immediate context of the composition of gospels, such as we have just seen in Chrysostom (and in other instances above), raise also the quite significant issue for patristic interpreters of the accessibility or obscurity of meaning in the gospel texts. Here, too, as so often, they run into a paradox – the gospels should be understood by ‘all’, but they are not. Indeed, some seem to flagrantly misunderstand them. Hence Epiphanius, for example, gives an evolutionary account of the successive compositions of the four gospels, each required by the inaccurate interpretation of its predecessor at the hands of heretical readers. In a telling parenthesis within his excoriation of such readers as Cerinthus and Ebion (the supposed founder of the ‘Ebionites’) for taking Matthew to refer to a merely human Christ, he states: οὐ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου αἰτίου ὄντος αὐτοῖς εἰς τὸ πλανηθῆναι, ἀλλὰ τῆς αὐτῶν διανοίας πεπλανημένης (‘the gospel was not the cause of their being deceived, but their own mind had been deceived’).¹⁰⁸ Hence one way to account for misunderstandings is simply to blame the recipient, or, indeed, to use the readers’ results as proof of their unsuitability to be Christian readers. Yet another approach is exemplified in Origen’s famous remark that the mysteries of the fourth gospel cannot be comprehended by those who do not share the experience of the beloved disciple.¹⁰⁹ Even if deliberately hyperbolic, this comment opens up the whole matter of the extensive

¹⁰⁸ Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.5.6 (GCS 31, p. 255).

¹⁰⁹ Τολμητέον τοίνυν εἰπεῖν ἀπαρχὴν μὲν πασῶν γραφῶν εἶναι τὰ εὐαγγέλια, τῶν δὲ εὐαγγελίων ἀπαρχὴν τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην, οὗ τὸν νοῦν οὐδεὶς δύναται λαβεῖν μὴ ἀναπεσὼν ἐπὶ τὸ στήθος Ἰησοῦ μηδὲ λαβὼν ἀπὸ Ἰησοῦ τὴν Μαρίαν γινομένην καὶ αὐτοῦ μητέρα (‘Indeed, one could dare to say that the gospels are the beginning of all the scriptures, and the gospel according to John – the one which no one can understand who has not reclined on the breast of Jesus, nor received from Jesus Mary as his mother – is the beginning of the gospels’) (*Comm. in Joh.* I.4.23 [GCS 10, p. 8]).

traditions of esoteric reading in the early church,¹¹⁰ held by gnostics,¹¹¹ but even by 'orthodox' authors who could readily imagine that a gospel (such as John's) was written for readers who had particular spiritual acuity.¹¹² Irenaeus's own defense of the unified fourfold gospel is a response to gnostic claims to unique readerly comprehension that eluded the other, 'material', Christians. Clement of Alexandria's reference to different editions of the Gospel according to Mark, including 'Secret Mark', presumes outright that gospel texts could have deliberately limited audiences.¹¹³ Engagement with patristic gospel interpretation complicates what it means to say that the gospels were written 'for all Christians', since the early interpreters on all sides struggled, with industry, invention and invective, with ways in which their meaning is obscure, or at least open to confusion or distortion. The fact that such conversations about 'true' gospel audiences

110 For full documentation see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Studies in the History of Religions 70; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

111 See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.3.1 (Valentinians); I.25.5 (Carpocratians), and the incipit to the *Gospel of Thomas* ('These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down' [trans. H. Koester and T. Lambdin, in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (rev. edn; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 126]).

112 See, e.g. Origen, *Comm. in Joh.*, II.27 (GCS 10, p. 84): 'Ὡς δὲ ἔχουσι νοῦν ἐκδέξασθαι δυνάμενον ἀκολούθως τοῖς γεγραμμένοις τὰ νομιζόμενα παραλελειφθαι ἔγραψεν ὁ Ἰωάννης τὸ "ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν" ('John wrote "the darkness did not apprehend it" [Jn 1.5] as to those possessing a mind which was able to follow readily the things thought to have been left out of the scriptures').

113 'As for Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account of the Lord's doings, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed [ἐκλεγόμενος ἃς χρησιμωτάτας ἐνόμισε πρὸς αὐξήσιν τῆς τῶν κατηγουμένων πίστεως]. But when Peter died a martyr, Mark came over to Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge. Thus he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected [συνέταξε πνευματικώτερον εὐαγγέλιον εἰς τὴν τῶν τελειουμένων χρῆσιν] . . . Thus, in sum, he prepared matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries [καὶ ἀποθνήσκων κατέλιπε τὸ αὐτοῦ σύγγραμμα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τῇ ἐν ἀλεξανδρείᾳ· ὅπου εἰσέτι νῦν ἀσφαλῶς εὐ μάλα τηρεῖται· ἀναγινωσκόμενον πρὸς αὐτοὺς μόνους τοὺς μουμένους τὰ μεγάλα μυστήρια'] (Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973] text 448 lines 15–450 line 2; translation 446). Debate over the Clementine letter and its referents continues, as in the trio of papers by Charles W. Hedrick ('The Secret Gospel of Mark: Stalemate in the Academy'), Gedaliyahu A. G. Stroumsa ('Comments on Charles Hedrick's Article: A Testimony'), and Bart D. Ehrman ('Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate') in the recent issue of *J ECS* 11 (2003), but this infamously debated document is by no means the only evidence of esoteric gospels in the early church.

did take place (in terms of elite readers or esoteric teaching) means that in the early church there were currents of thought that ran against the universal readership that Professor Bauckham argues was presumed by each of the evangelists and their readers up until the mid-twentieth century. We should also at least take note of the fact that the common patristic boast that the gospels were written in a manner that was so simple and straightforward that they could, unlike the teachings of Greek philosophers and others, convey their meaning to all possible readers, was itself a rhetorical arrow in the quiver of patristic apologetics.¹¹⁴

III. Conclusions and implications

This brief survey of patristic comments on the audiences of the gospels should suffice to show that Richard Bauckham’s thesis about the history of gospel interpretation as presented in his influential essay has either missed or unduly minimized the essential tensions that governed patristic (and later) scholarship, which continually steered between the fourfold gospel and the one gospel, the divergence and unity of the accounts, the human and divine authorship of the gospels. The pervasiveness of localizing traditions (including audience request legends), to which we have sought to give due emphasis here, shows that it was not modern redaction critics who first introduced the alien idea of ‘gospel communities’ or ‘a specific Christian community’ (10) as an audience, but that, in line with both ancient literary criticism and their own apologetic purposes, patristic interpreters of the gospels thought it important to ask where, when and to whom each of the four gospels was originally written. There are various reasons why they do this – their rhetorical training which assumed that texts were designed to persuade in suitable ways their intended readers,¹¹⁵ and, of course, the fact that for the fathers the authority of these documents depended upon the biographical pedigree of the author as either an apostle (Matthew and John) or a sub-apostolic deputy (Mark and Luke). Such paradoxes of patristic thinking – maintaining simultaneously and wholeheartedly these texts’ local origins and yet their timeless truth, both their human and their divine authorship – are not well served by the dichotomy inherent to ‘For Whom Were Gospels Written?’ The earliest exegetes were not modern historical critics, but they were ancient critics who understood

114 See, e.g., Origen, *c. Cels.* VI.2.4 (with further references, literature and discussion in Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 100–8).

115 At the very least they demonstrate that the impulse toward authorial intention appears often related to some concept of originating situation and addressees, what the ancients called ἡ αἰτία. What might appear more strange on the landscape of ancient literary criticism is Bauckham’s move to pronounce a universal, generalized αἰτία on all four of these documents which were written, as patristic authors universally acknowledge, in different places and at different times.

that certain questions – such as the circumstances of composition, which included the addressees – had to be engaged. We have seen many examples of how they did so. However, not one of the authors we have surveyed here says that all four of the gospels were originally written for ‘all Christians’, or for ‘any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire’ (1). Why, if Professor Bauckham’s proposal does indeed represent a return to the way the gospels have always been read, do we not find it attested as such among patristic exegetes? It seems fair to ask that he either produce such evidence or abandon this form of argument for his thesis, and declare that he is actually calling for a more novel way to read the historical occasion of the gospels, a claim which would have to be demonstrated on grounds other than a presumed conformity with the entire past exegetical tradition.

In my judgment we do well to move beyond these questionable and extreme dichotomies¹¹⁶ (either the gospels were written for ‘relatively isolated, introverted communities’ or for ‘*any and every* Christian community’) and recognize that the hermeneutical implications of these narratives – even if they arose on local soil and hence were *in some measure* (and I would join company with Professor Bauckham in insisting that this caution be respected) colored by the experiences and needs of the Christian congregations most intimately known to the authors – were such that these texts by their very nature were open to a wider readership, whether or not that was their authors’ intentions. In the attempt to create epiphanic moments of encounter with Jesus via text, each evangelist, although naturally at some points both echoing and entering debates on the insistent rhetorical, catechetical and theological needs of the churches he knew, as he knew them, opened the door for anyone conversant with the Greek language to enter, see, and live inside the scripted reality of the Christ-event. Each of the four canonical gospels (as well as other gospel literature that eventually did not make the cut) needs to be investigated in terms of its own particular forms of persuasion and presumed or rhetorically constructed audience, keeping in mind that, given the literary complexity and rhetorical artistry of these texts, they likely had more than a single audience in view in any case.

But no one, including the evangelists, could have predicted that the gospels would so quickly and successfully foment the ‘worldwide Christian movement’ that gradually came into being. The genius of early Christian literary culture was its ability to create a trans-local, trans-generational readership that found in these

¹¹⁶ I think we should resist in principle the assumption behind the dichotomy, i.e. that scholars only espouse or employ a single methodological perspective or commitment. Methodological flexibility seems to me to be most desirable, as curious readers ask questions which require different approaches. That plurality was also, though perhaps within a different set of parameters, present in patristic exegesis (see, e.g., the major treatment by Young, *Biblical Exegesis*).

texts and in their ritual reenactment in local worshipping communities access to the living presence of the Christ viewed as both past and present (and future). For this I think we especially have Mark to thank, for he transformed the narrative potentialities of bare-bones pre-Pauline missionary kerygma (1 Cor 15.3f.) through the mediatorial hermeneutics of the Pauline letters,¹¹⁷ into a work which offered his readers – whoever he had in mind – a chance to stand on equal footing with the original disciples of Jesus. It was this hermeneutical act that won the day, even if Mark's own version of this new brand of literature, εὐαγγέλιον, was destined to be rewritten within decades by Matthew, Luke and perhaps John, while Mark itself, according to available evidence, appears to have had quite limited (rather than universal) distribution.¹¹⁸ But the fourfold gospel was by no means a predicted, predictable, or even likely outcome. It needed an Irenaeus to provide it with its justification¹¹⁹ – cosmological, scriptural and theological. To presume that feat had already been successfully attempted by the earliest evangelists themselves seems to attribute too much of the results to the causes.

117 I have explored this phenomenon in more depth in an essay, 'Epiphanic Evolutions in Earliest Christianity', which will appear in a volume edited by Nanno Marinatos *et al.*, *Deus Praesens: Divine Epiphany in the Ancient World to the Christian Era* (Illinois Classical Series, forthcoming).

118 Édouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus* (ET; *New Gospel Studies* 5/1–3; Macon, GA: Mercer, 1993; first French edn 1950) 3.188 puzzles over the almost complete lack of reference to Mark in the apostolic fathers (all save Hermas). The disproportionately poor distribution of the Gospel according to Mark is also confirmed in the papyri (Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1968] 256, counts only a single papyrus of Mark, in contrast with 15 for Matthew, 7 for Luke and 17 for John).

119 Of course it remains a matter of debate whether Irenaeus was an innovator or was riding the crest of a wave already in motion. But he surely did not inherit *a fait accompli*.