
Introduction

The material consequences of the industrial revolution are on ready display, eagerly sought by most people most of the time. Yet in our overcrowded cities and threatened environment we are learning to our dismay that progress has not been an unmixed blessing. In fact, the vast majority of social critics, theologians, poets, philosophers, artists, and even politicians have agonized endlessly over the value of the changes modernity has wrought.

The social and psychological consequences have been controversial as well. The story has both good news and bad. Some critics have seen modernity as the liberation of the human spirit from the shackles of the past. Yet others have decried the aridity and inhumanity we seem to have visited upon ourselves. The critics therefore have been unable to agree on what precisely has happened to us as human beings. Nonetheless, the vast majority acknowledge that industrialized societies have passed a watershed that has irreversibly changed the landscape of human endeavor and perception.

Our primary interest in writing this book is biblical interpretation, especially the interpretation of the three “Synoptic” Gospels (so-called because Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much in common in their presentations of the story of Jesus). Yet our focus on these ancient writings does not divert attention from interest in many of the features that characterize the modern world. That is because the simple fact is that the industrial revolution has had great impact upon our ability to read and understand the Bible, and it is with this particular aspect of interpretation that we are fundamentally concerned. For readers of the Bible, this great watershed we have passed—the “Great Transformation,” as it has sometimes been called—threatens our ability to hear what the Bible once so clearly said to its earliest readers. After all, the Bible was written in an agrarian, preindustrial world where things were very different from what we see today. Neither the biblical authors nor their first audiences could ever have anticipated anything like the Great Transformation that has taken place over the last two hundred years. Vast areas of human experience have been forever changed and with this has come a fundamentally new way of perceiving the world. Moreover, if the outlook of the earlier era was so markedly different from ours today, and

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our contention is that it was emphatically so, it would hardly be surprising that something equally fundamental has happened to our capacity to read and understand the Bible.

It has become commonplace, of course, to recognize the time-and-place boundedness of the Bible. We know the New Testament to be the product of a small group of people living in the first century of the common era in the eastern Mediterranean region. But the distance between the world of that group and our own is usually calculated in historical terms, in terms of the flow of events or ideas that might account for what biblical documents ostensibly describe. Much scholarly effort has gone into telling that historical story.

Such accounts are not sufficient, however, for understanding the position of the contemporary reader of the Bible. We must also recognize, as indeed recent social-scientific studies of the New Testament have begun to do, that the distance between ourselves and the Bible is *social* as well as temporal and conceptual. Such social distance includes radical differences in social structures, social roles, values, and general cultural features. In fact, it may be that such social distance is the most fundamental distance of all. It may have had a greater impact on our ability to read and understand the Bible than most of what has preoccupied scholarly attention to date. In order to understand how that might be the case, as well as why it is necessary to address the issue directly, it may be helpful to remind ourselves once again just how revolutionary the Great Transformation really was.

The Great Transformation

Nowadays we read the agrarian New Testament in the context of a modern, industrial world. What actually happens in that process? To sharpen our sensitivities to what occurs, we must be aware, at least in a summary way, of the changes that our society has undergone. A good place to begin is in clarifying the meaning of the terms “agrarian” and “industrial.” By the term “agrarian” we do *not* mean “agricultural.” Nowadays less than 5 percent of the U.S. population works the land as farmers. They are agriculturalists. Yet the term “agrarian” does not serve to draw the contrast between these rural farmers and our urban factory workers. Perhaps farmers and factory workers should be distinguished in any common historical or social setting, but our concern is rather with the much broader issue of what life was like before and after the industrial revolution. The fact is that today’s farmer and factory worker are likely to share a common modern outlook in substantial measure and both have far more in common with each other than either would have with an ancient counterpart.

In our usage, then, the term “agrarian” will have a meaning much closer to “preindustrial” than to the term “agricultural.” It is meant to encompass all who lived before the industrial revolution occurred, whether the vast majority who tilled the soil or the tiny minority who lived in towns and the few cities. In this sense both the first-century rural peasant and the first-century urbanite who

never once touched the actual soil were “agrarian.” And similarly, both the modern manufacturer and the modern farmer are “industrialized.” In short, the contrast we wish to draw is between the outlook of the modern, industrial period and the worldview in vogue before the Great Transformation took place.

The Agrarian World

Agrarian societies began to make their appearance in the fertile valleys of the Middle East some five to six thousand years ago. Their presence was marked by the invention of the plow, the wheel, the sail, the discovery of metallurgy, and the domestication of animals. The result was a rapid increase in agricultural production that created a relatively substantial economic surplus for the first time in human history. These technological innovations had a ripple effect that irrevocably altered many of the patterns of the older horticultural (small-scale farming) societies that dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Agricultural production developed on a previously unknown scale. Alphabetic writing, coinage, and standing armies emerged for the first time. Likewise, the spread of the preindustrial city, the emergence of the city-state empire, and a rapid increase in population all accompanied this shift from the horticultural to agrarian worlds. As a result of this agrarian technological revolution, by the late Bronze Age simple agrarian societies covered the eastern Mediterranean region,

A second phase of the agrarian revolution is usually identified by macro-sociologists as beginning with the spread of iron. By the eighth century B.C.E., the use of iron began to affect daily life on a wide scale. Large-scale, “advanced” agrarian societies emerged during this period, a period with which students of the Bible are familiar. Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, and other large societies blossomed, made their mark, and vanished in the social flow of history. Yet all of these were as typically agrarian as those later societies that continued to exist right up to the beginning of the industrial revolution itself. Many of their fundamental agrarian characteristics remained unchanged until the modern era.

The ancients who lived and wrote in these agrarian societies of the Mediterranean world, the biblical world, inhabited what modern anthropologists have come to call a “diffusion sphere”—a region sharing a set of common cultural institutions which have persisted over long periods of time. Such a region formed a “culture continent,” as it is sometimes called. This description was first applied by American anthropologists to Native American societies that shared common cultural adaptations to the various ecological regions of North America. The phrase was soon adopted for study of other culture areas, however, including the circum-Mediterranean, the area of interest to New Testament scholars. In the circum-Mediterranean region, five millennia of common participation in conquest, colonialism, connubium, and trade, along with a mixed, small-scale farming and herding village economy embedded in a series of larger agrarian empires, created a set of common cultural institutions which have likewise persisted over time. The resulting “Mediterranean culture-continent” exists yet today.

What this means for New Testament scholars is that in the Mediterranean

region we have available a kind of living laboratory in which to learn about social patterns and dynamics that are often strikingly different from those we know in the United States. Circum-Mediterranean social structures, value sets, statuses, and roles are quite different from those found in northern Europe or North America. Given the historical fact that the persons depicted in the Bible once lived in this Mediterranean culture-continent, it appears that the circum-Mediterranean could offer a compelling alternative to the set of social scenarios in which ethnocentric U.S. and northern European readings typically place the New Testament. These social scenarios might even allow us to develop a critical, even if partial and incomplete, social and cultural distance from the North American culture-continent and thereby provide a modest step out of our world and into that of the Bible.

Critics and skeptics of course will quickly recognize two important qualifications that must be made. One is the obvious fact that the ancient Mediterranean culture-continent and the modern Mediterranean culture-continent are not exact equivalents. In two thousand years things have changed. But two comments might be offered in this regard. The first is that given the persistence of many of the characteristics of culture areas over long periods of time, the modern Mediterranean world is far closer to the world of the Bible than North America has been during *any* period of its history. The societies of the present-day circum-Mediterranean area thus offer the closest living analogue we possess to the value sets and social structures that characterized daily human interaction in the Bible. How close the match of ancient and modern might really be must of course be tested in every case. Yet it is important to say that there is something actual and rather specific to test. Moreover, the best way to carry out such tests is with the careful and discriminating use of models drawn from actual Mediterranean area studies. Models are simplified, abstract representations of more complex real-world interactions. People think with models in order to understand, control, and/or predict.

We shall see the relevance of this more clearly in a moment. But it is important to remember that models are actually cognitive devices to help unearth dimensions of a setting not at once apparent, as well as to develop the ramifications of such dimensions. Models must be tested with actual data, in this case information from biblical documents, and refashioned accordingly. If they facilitate understanding as they should, fine. If not, they can be discarded in favor of others. Any given model might be inadequate to the set of data we have in the documents or the situation in antiquity might differ too greatly from that for which the model was created. In either case, the model must change.

A second caveat is more difficult. As with the authors of these pages, most New Testament scholars were trained as historians and taught to focus on what is particular and unique about moments in the past. Thus countless historical books and articles are still at pains to discriminate between the Roman and the Greek, the Egyptian and the Hebrew, even the Judean and the Galilean. We know all of the ways ancient Israelites were atypical and unique, and as historians we resist

attempts to lump them together with other groups. We worry over assuming that conditions known to have existed in the second century can be applied to the first, or whether the situation in Syria in the year 90 can be assumed to be the same as it was in the year 80.

The social sciences, by contrast, seek the culturally common and generic. Their focus is not on unique details but on generalizations. Their methods focus on what groups have in common rather than what makes them unique. Instead of that which distinguishes the ancient Egyptian from the ancient Roman, the social scientists want to know what they, as members of an agrarian, Mediterranean world, share in common. They might even want to know for how long the common features persisted. Unfortunately, however, because historians and social scientists typically inquire after these two different interests, conversation between them often becomes a dialogue of the deaf.

The main reason for the difficulty is that people can think at different levels of abstraction, and various academic disciplines often work at different levels of abstraction. Mathematics, for example, is most abstract since mathematical procedures refer to everything in general yet nothing in particular. "One plus one equals two" refers to abstract quantities and can be applied in almost any situation. Social-science models also work at a comparatively high level of abstraction, and can likewise be applied rather broadly. For example, at the level such models function there is indeed a broadly generic thing called a "preindustrial city." This model or mental construct of the preindustrial city consists of common characteristics of all such cities throughout the Mediterranean region over long stretches of human history. At a high level of abstraction it gives us a broad picture of what such cities were like. Yet at the low level of abstraction at which the historian explicitly works, only unique, particular cities existed, for example, the city of Damascus. At this level, historians often have to think about what is distinctive or different about the classical city on the one hand and the oriental city on the other, or perhaps even two oriental cities like Jerusalem and Damascus. At a lower level of abstraction they were not alike at all. As everyone knows, at the most concrete levels of reality nothing is alike at all, not even two snowflakes.

Yet for all of the unique qualities of particular cities that historians love to uncover, qualities that require data from each particular site under study, at a higher level of abstraction there remains a common set of social patterns that pervaded all of the cities of the Mediterranean culture area, Jerusalem and Damascus included. Such common characteristics are the fare of social scientists and can frequently be very instructive for our reading of the biblical documents. Commonalities can illuminate. They can provide an understanding of the social context of the Bible in ways the historian's data cannot. For this reason we have chosen social-science models drawn from the studies of Mediterranean anthropologists, and working at a fairly high level of abstraction, in developing the "Reading Scenarios" and "Notes" that follow in our commentary. They are an attempt to set the Gospels in an agrarian, Mediterranean context more nearly like that out of which they first came.

The Industrial Revolution

If the writing of the New Testament took place in the agrarian, Mediterranean world of antiquity, nonetheless our task is to read it in the modern, industrialized West. The second great social revolution with which we are concerned, therefore, is the one that created the modern era. Late in the nineteenth century, economic historians began to use the term “industrial revolution” to characterize the technological and economic innovations that constituted this second great revolution in human history. Social historians trace its beginnings to technological innovations in Scotland and England that, between 1760 and 1830, dramatically changed the face of British society. To be sure, technological advance had been accelerating both in Great Britain and on the continent for some time, but during that crucial period at the end of the eighteenth century particular developments led to a rapid and substantial increase in industrial activity.

Best known of these eighteenth-century innovations are those that affected the textile industry: the flying shuttle, the spinning jenny, and the huge weaving machines that were soon converted to newly developed steam power. By 1845, textile production in Great Britain had increased 500 percent beyond the level of a generation earlier. Other inventions quickly followed that industrialized every sector of British society. In the same period, new production methods increased iron output twenty-four times over and a created a ninefold jump in the output of coal. A machine-tool industry emerged and with it came the initial efforts at standardization of parts that made machine repair both feasible and inexpensive.

By 1860 the electric dynamo, the transformer, and the oil industry had made their appearance. Each brought ripple effects in turn. By the 1880s, new processes had been found for making steel and as a result railroads spread across both Great Britain and much of the United States. Agriculture was transformed by the invention of reapers, mowers, threshing machines, steam tractors, and steel plows. Most importantly for the development of trade and markets, the new industrialization spread rapidly across both Western Europe and North America and by the end of the nineteenth century the center of change had shifted as Great Britain lost the technological and economic leadership to the United States.

Recounting the later phases of this ongoing revolution is unnecessary to our purposes. We have said enough to indicate that when we speak of industrial societies we mean those societies in which industrialized production fueled economic growth of unprecedented proportions from the mid-eighteenth century until the present. It is a world the New Testament writers could never have imagined; it is therefore a world they did not address.

We have not quite said enough, however, to really evoke an appreciation for the magnitude of what has happened. Most of the time we take it so much for granted that we forget how many areas of life have been affected. It will be worthwhile, therefore, to highlight a few of the specific changes industrialization

has wrought. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but it is illustrative. It is a set of random gleanings from the work of social historians that will serve to remind us how great the transformation really was.

1. In agrarian societies more than 90 percent of the population was rural. In industrial societies more than 90 percent is urban.
2. In agrarian societies 90–95 percent of the population was engaged in what sociologists call the “primary” industries (farming and extracting raw materials). In the United States today it is 4.9 percent.
3. In agrarian societies 2–4 percent of the population was literate. In industrial societies 2–4 percent are not.
4. The birthrate in most agrarian societies was about forty per thousand per year. In the United States, as in most industrial societies, it is less than half that. Yet death rates have dropped even more dramatically than birthrates. We thus have the curious phenomenon of far fewer births and rapidly rising population.
5. Life expectancy in the city of Rome in the first century B.C.E. was about twenty years at birth. If the perilous years of infancy were survived, it rose to about forty, one-half our present expectations.
6. In contrast to the huge cities we know today, the largest city in Europe in the fourteenth century, Venice, had a population of 78,000. London had 35,000. Vienna had 3,800. Though population figures for antiquity are notoriously difficult to come by, recent estimates for Jerusalem are about 35,000. For Capernaum, 1,500. For Nazareth about 200.
7. The Department of Labor currently lists in excess of 20,000 occupations in the United States and hundreds more are added to the list annually. By contrast, the tax rolls for Paris (pop. 59,000) in the year 1313 list only 157.
8. Unlike the modern world, in agrarian societies 1–3 percent of the population usually owns one- to two-thirds of the arable land. Since 90 percent or more were peasants, the vast majority owned subsistence plots at best.
9. The size of the federal bureaucracy in the United States in 1816 was 5,000 employees. In 1971 it was 2,852,000 and growing rapidly. While there was a political, administrative, and military apparatus in antiquity, nothing remotely comparable to the modern governmental bureaucracy ever existed. Instead, goods and services were mediated by patrons who operated largely outside governmental control.
10. More than one-half of all families in agrarian societies were broken during the childbearing and child-rearing years by the death of one or both parents. In India at the turn of the twentieth century the figure was 71 percent. Thus widows and orphans were everywhere.
11. In agrarian societies the family was the unit of both production and con-

sumption. Since the industrial revolution, family production or enterprise has nearly disappeared and the unit of production has become the individual worker. Nowadays the family is only a unit of consumption.

12. The largest “factories” in Roman antiquity did not exceed fifty workers. In the records of the medieval craft guilds from London, the largest employed eighteen. The industrial corporation, a modern invention, did not exist.
13. In 1850, the “prime movers” in the United States (i.e., steam engines in factories, sailing vessels, work animals, etc.) had a combined capacity of 8.5 million horsepower. By 1970 this had risen to 20 billion.
14. The cost of moving one ton of goods one mile (measured in U.S. dollars in China at the beginning of the industrial revolution) was:

Steamboat	2.4	Wheelbarrow	20.0
Rail	2.7	Pack donkey	24.0
Junk	12.0	Packhorse	30.0
Animal-drawn cart	13.0	Carrying by pole	48.0
Pack mule	17.0		

It is little wonder that overland trade at any distance was insubstantial in antiquity.

15. Productive capacity in industrial societies exceeds that in the most advanced agrarian societies known by more than one hundredfold.
16. Given the shock and consternation caused by the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the forced resignation of Richard M. Nixon, we sometimes forget that this sort of internal political upheaval is nothing like it was in the agrarian world. Of the 79 Roman emperors, 31 were murdered, 6 driven to suicide, and 4 were deposed by force. Moreover, such upheavals in antiquity were frequently accompanied by civil war and the enslavement of thousands.

Obviously, our random listing could go on. Yet even in its brevity it may provide a sense of the kind of changes that have occurred as the result of the industrial revolution. It has been a watershed unlike any the world has ever seen. Should we be surprised if major changes in our perception of the world have occurred as well? And should we be surprised if that in turn has had a fundamental impact on our ability to read and understand the Bible?

Texts: Written and Unwritten

In thinking about the impact of the industrial revolution on our reading of the Bible, we must begin by taking account of what is sometimes called the “unwritten” part of any writing. This “unwritten” part includes the things an author presumes his or her audience knows about how the world works that he or she can leave between the lines of a written document, so to speak, yet which

are crucial to its understanding. Conversation partners always share such an implied understanding of the world, just as do authors and readers. But how much is really implied?

It should be self-evident that not everything necessary to a conversation can be written down because a text simply cannot say everything that needs to be known about the topic under discussion. To say everything would be tedious in the extreme. A text, spoken or written, would be cluttered to the point of unreadability and conversation partners would probably cease to interact. Inevitably, then, there is much that a written document can only sketch in outline, and even more that has to be left to the imagination of the reader. Because this is so, an author inescapably depends upon the general cultural knowledge a reader can supply from his or her own resources to “complete” the text. Successful communication can be carried on in no other way.

A writer in contemporary America, for example, when referring to a “Big Mac” for the first time in a story, has no need to explain that this item is a hamburger. Nor is an explanation required that this hamburger is made by a particular fast-food chain whose logo is the golden arches. An American reader can be counted upon to understand and provide the necessary visual imagery. Such pictures are not only worth a thousand words, they can save that many and more if they can be supplied by the reader rather than the writer. In other words, written documents are realized in terms of language and, like language itself, written documents also have a kind of “indeterminacy” without which a reader would remain largely unengaged and probably bored as well. Because the reader must interact with the writing and “complete” it if it is to make sense, every written document invites immediate participation on the part of a reader. Thus writings provide what is necessary, but cannot provide everything.

Reading Scenarios

The primary reason all this works is that reading is in a very fundamental way a social act. Readers and writers always participate in a social system that provides the clues for filling in between the lines. Meanings are embedded in a social system that is shared and understood by all participants in any communication process. While meanings not rooted in a shared social system can sometimes be communicated, such communication inevitably requires extended explanation because a writer cannot depend upon the reader to conjure up the proper sets of related images or concepts needed to complete the unwritten part of the text.

Such an understanding of the social moorings of the reading process is confirmed by contemporary studies of reading. A “scenario model” drawn from recent research in experimental psychology suggests that we understand a written document as setting forth a succession of implicit or explicit mental pictures consisting of culturally specific scenes or schemes sketched by an author. These in turn evoke corresponding scenes or schemes in the mind of the reader that are

drawn from the reader's own experience in the culture. With the scenarios suggested by the author as a starting point, the reader then carries out appropriate alterations to the settings or episodes as directed by clues in the written document. In this way an author begins with the familiar and directs the reader to what is new. As a result of this we might say that a kind of "contract" exists between author and reader. Considerate writers attempt to accommodate their readers by beginning with scenarios those readers would readily understand. With such mutually shared understanding in place, an author can then proceed to the new or unfamiliar.

By such standards, of course, the authors of the Synoptic Gospels "violate" their author–reader contract with modern Americans. They neither begin with what we know about the world nor make any attempt to explain their ancient world in terms we might understand from contemporary American experience. They presume we are first-century, eastern Mediterranean readers and share their social system. They assume we understand the intricacies of honor and shame, that we are fully aware of what it means to live a preindustrial city and/or village life, that we know how folk healers operate, that we believe in a limited good world assuaged by patrons and brokers, and the like. They do not bother to start with what is familiar to us now. Another way of saying this is simply to remind ourselves that none of the Gospel writers had modern Americans in mind when they wrote.

If we seek to make this author–reader contract work, therefore, at least in the case of reading the New Testament, we will have to make the effort to be considerate readers. To this end, we will have to voluntarily enter the world that they presumed existed when they wrote. We will have to be willing to do what is necessary in order to bring to our reading a set of mental scenarios proper to *their* time, place, and culture instead of importing ones from modern America.

Of course, making the effort to be considerate readers has not always been a priority of American Bible students. Consciously or unconsciously we have often used mental images or scenarios drawn from modern American experience to fill in the unwritten pictures that complete the biblical text. Thus, when Luke tells us that the family of Jesus could find no room in the inn at Bethlehem, it is not difficult for most Americans to construct the scene. We do it from our modern experience of overbooked hotels or motels in crowded locations. That such a "scenario" is completely inappropriate, however, never dawns on many American readers. They simply do not know that ancient Bethlehem had no hotels, that advance reservations were an unknown phenomenon, and, more importantly, that room in any village lodging was based on kinship or social rank rather than offered on a first-come-first-served basis.

Such ethnocentric and anachronistic readings of the New Testament are common enough in our society that they underscore our point that reading is a social act. Yet how can contemporary American Bible readers participate in that social act if, for the most part, they have been socialized and shaped by the experience of living in twentieth-century America rather than first-century Palestine?

Will we not continue to conjure up reading scenarios that authors and first readers of the New Testament could never have imagined? If we do, of course, the inevitable result will be misunderstanding. Too often we simply do not bother to fill in between the lines as the first readers would have done because we do not bother to acquire some of the reservoir of ancient experience on which the authors expected their readers to draw. For better or worse, we read ourselves and our world back into the text in ways we do not suspect.

High- and Low-Context Societies

The important point we are making here—indeed, the one that gives reason for the commentary that follows—can be made in another important way. The New Testament was written in what anthropologists call a “high-context” society. People who communicate with each other in high-context societies presume a broadly shared, well-understood knowledge of the context of anything referred to in conversation or in writing. For example, everyone in ancient Mediterranean villages would have had a clear and concrete knowledge of what sowing entailed, largely because the skills involved were shared by most (male) members of that society. No writer would need to explain. Thus writers in such societies usually produce sketchy and impressionistic writings, leaving much to the reader’s or hearer’s imagination. They also encode much information in widely known symbolic or stereotypical statements. In this way, they require the reader to fill in large gaps in the unwritten portion of the writing. All readers are expected to know the context and therefore to understand the references in question.

In this way, the Bible, like most documents written in the high-context Mediterranean world, presumes readers to have a broad and adequate knowledge of its social context. It offers little by way of extended explanation. When Luke writes that Elizabeth was “called barren” (1:36), for example, he feels no necessity to explain for the reader the critical imperatives of ancient kinship, or the position of barren women in the village life of agrarian societies, or the function of the gossip networks in an honor-shame context, even though little of this information is known to modern readers of his story. All of this, however, is critical to understanding his statement about Elizabeth’s being barren. Luke simply assumed his readers would understand.

By contrast, “low-context” societies are those that produce highly specific and detailed documents that leave little for the reader to fill in or supply. The United States and northern Europe are typical low-context societies. Accordingly, Americans and northern Europeans expect writers to give the necessary background if they refer to something unusual or atypical. A computer operator, for example, learns a certain jargon and certain types of logic (e.g., Boolean) that are not widely understood outside the circle of computer initiates. Within that circle these concepts can be used without explanation because the explanations are easily supplied by any competent reader of technical computer manuals. They can remain a part of the “unwritten” text that the writer expects a reader to sup-

ply. But since they are not yet part of the experience of the general public, when writing for a nontechnical audience a writer must explain the computer jargon and the technical information at some length if he or she wants to be understood.

A moment's reflection will make clear why modern industrial societies are low-context and ancient agrarian ones were high-context. The difficulties a general American audience has with computer jargon alluded to immediately above are all too common an experience in modern life. Life today has complexified into a thousand spheres of experience that the general public does not share in common. There are small worlds of experience in every corner of our society that the rest of us know nothing about. Granted, there is much in our writing that needs no explanation because it relates to experience all Americans can understand. But nowadays the worlds of the engineer, the plumber, the insurance salesman, and the farmer are in large measure self-contained. Should any one of these people write for "the layperson" who is not an engineer, plumber, insurance salesman, or farmer, he or she would have much to explain.

It was very different in antiquity, however, where change was slow and where the vast majority of the population had the common experience of farming the land and dealing with landlords, traders, merchants, and tax collectors. People had more in common and experience was far less discrepant. Thus writers could more nearly count on readers to fill in the gaps from behaviors socialized in a common world.

The obvious problem this creates for reading the Bible today is that low-context readers in the United States frequently mistake the Bible for a low-context document and erroneously assume the author has provided all of the contextual information needed to understand it. Consider how many U.S. and northern European people believe the Bible is a perfectly adequate and thorough statement of Christian life and behavior! Such people assume they are free to fill in the gaps from their own experience because, if that were not the case, the New Testament writers, like any considerate low-context authors, would have provided the unfamiliar background a reader requires. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case because expectations of what an author will provide (or has provided) are markedly different in modern and agrarian societies.

Recontextualization

Thinking about American readers reading Mediterranean writings requires us to clarify the situation one step further. We have already suggested that each time a writing is read by a new reader, the fields of reference tend to shift and multiply because of the reader's cultural location. Among some literary theorists this latter phenomenon is called "recontextualization." This term refers to the multiple ways different readers may "complete" a text as a result of reading it over against their different social contexts. (Written documents may also be "decontextualized" when read ahistorically for their aesthetic or formal characteristics.) Of course,

such recontextualization is a familiar phenomenon to students of the Synoptic Gospels. A simple reading of Luke 1:1-4 will make it clear that the Gospel documents contain what the author says that people before him said that Jesus said and did. Obviously, the actions and teachings of Jesus were remembered, reappropriated, and reapplied for some fifty years in the life of the Hellenistic church before the author of Luke wrote down his version of the story. Thus each point between Jesus and Luke at which the story was told anew was a new step in the process of recontextualization. This same thing can be seen in the work of redaction critics who have shown us how shifts in the settings of the parables of Jesus in various Gospels have altered their emphasis and/or meaning (e.g., the parable of the Lost Sheep in Matt 18:12-13; Luke 15:4-6; Thomas 98:22-27). In whatever measure these Synoptic recontextualizations of the Jesus story “complete” the text differently than an original hearer of Jesus might have done, an interpretative step of significant proportions has been taken.

The same is true for recontextualizations into the world of the modern reader. Indeed, the concern of our entire commentary is exactly this phenomenon of moving the text from the Mediterranean culture-continent in which it was written to the new setting in the Western, industrialized societies where it is now read. The outcome will be another recontextualization. Our thesis is that this particular recontextualization, this modernization of the text, is profoundly social in character, and that readers socialized in the industrial world are *unlikely* to complete the text of the New Testament in ways the ancient authors could have imagined.

In sum, we insist that meanings realized in reading written documents inevitably derive from a social system. Reading is always a social act. If both reader and writer share the same social system, the same experience, adequate communication is highly probable. But if either reader or writer come from mutually alien social systems, then as a rule, nonunderstanding, or at best misunderstanding, will be the rule. Because this is so, understanding the range of meanings that would have been plausible to a first-century reader of the Synoptic Gospels requires the contemporary reader to seek access to the social system(s) available to the original audience. Moreover, to recover these social systems, in whatever measure possible, we believe it essential to employ adequate, explicit, social-science models that have been drawn especially from circum-Mediterranean studies. Only so can we complete the written texts as considerate readers who, for better or worse, have imported them into an alien world.

How to Use this Book

In its entirety this book is an attempt to provide the reader with fresh insight into the social system shared by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and their original, first-century Mediterranean audiences. Hence its purpose is to facilitate a reading that is consonant with the initial cultural contexts of those writings. Thus, along with our commentary on each of the Synoptic Gospels we

present a brief collection of scenarios describing Mediterranean norms and values over against which these documents might appropriately be read. Throughout the course of the commentary, we have noted where respective scenarios fit to shed light on what is referred to in the passage in question. Making use of this cross-referenced set of reading scenarios is essential to understanding the textual notes in the commentary.

We suggest that these scenarios or conceptual schemes are not too different from what first-century readers would have conjured up from the social system they shared with the author. It is what they would have used to fill in the “unwritten” parts of the text. Whether we are talking about honor-shame, or the perception of basic divisions in human society, or understandings and feelings about city and noncity regions and the people who fill them, or about how people behave in conflict, or about any of the ceremonies and rituals or major institutions of the time—in all of these we are talking about the ancient Mediterranean equivalent of the modern Big Mac. None of these things needed explanation for a first-century audience. The fundamental point, then, is a simple one. If we wish to learn the Gospel writers’ meanings, we must learn the social system that their language encodes. The scenarios are designed to assist in that process.

Our commentary attempts to assist a reader’s interpretation of a Gospel book. It does not, however, include everything one might want to know about these documents. For example, it prescind from concerns about the historical origin and development of the Gospel tradition or the dating of the respective Gospels. It is important, then, to say that our approach is supplemental to much traditional New Testament scholarship in which the authors of this book have been duly trained. Traditional historical studies provide basic information that we often presuppose in the comments we make. We usually do not recount historical events, provide linguistic information, explain literary allusions, or trace back the cultural concepts to which the writings often refer. Similarly, we do not include literary criticism that seeks to portray plot structure, narrative logic, the various rhetorical features, or even the literary forms contained in the Gospel stories. That too is supplemental to our work. What we do seek to provide is what these more traditional approaches do not: insight into the social system in which New Testament language is embedded. We consider that a missing, but essential, ingredient in any attempt to read the New Testament.

It is also important to say that we are fully aware of the fact that the anonymous Gospel authors, with their own distinctive purposes, and in their own editorial ways, tell us what others said that Jesus said and did. We are cognizant of the many layers one must probe to do a history of the synoptic tradition or to find data for a historically acceptable life of Jesus. We do not make the precritical assumption that the Gospels are simple reporting of the words or actions of Jesus. Instead, we intend to facilitate a reading of the documents as they now stand, to find out what the final authors said and meant to say to their audiences. We believe we can contribute to this effort with a social-scientific approach because models operate at a level of abstraction somewhat above that of his-

torical inquiry. What this means is that whatever the layer of synoptic tradition one might look to, and whichever person one might wish to focus on, whether Jesus, his hearers, later collectors of tradition, or the Gospel writers themselves, all of these assume the social system of the agrarian, Mediterranean world. All live in an honor-shame culture, all presume collectivistic personality, all understand patrons, brokers, and clientage. All are aware of Mediterranean male and female roles. All know how to protect themselves against the evil eye. All know of the behavior proper to elites and nonelites. No stage in the developing tradition stands outside these social realities. Should we wish to tell the story of Christian origins, we would have to take the discrete stages of Gospel tradition quite seriously. But since our intention is to facilitate a reading of the final form of the documents in terms of a first-century Mediterranean audience, we can bypass concern about the stages leading to the final versions of the Gospels we now possess.

For the same reason, we have chosen not to distinguish between the story world internal to the writing and the external world from which the Gospel writers draw their scenarios. Doing so might be an important aspect of narrative criticism, but it is unnecessary for our task since both worlds depend on language embedded in a common social system. That is true even when the narrative world seeks to contravene the social system. Occasionally, of course, it is necessary to move to a lower level of abstraction to help modern readers understand the changing conditions in early “Christianity” that account for certain references in the narrative. Here we will feel free to distinguish between the period of Jesus and that of the final Gospel document, or between broader Greco-Roman world and narrower “Christian” community envisioned in the writing. Sometimes differences in the social systems of the Romans and Judeans are important as well, just as important perhaps as the differences in the social settings of small urban elites and a large rural peasantry. Where appropriate, we have made such distinctions.

What all this means is that ours is not a complete literary and historical commentary on the Gospels. It is a simplified social-scientific commentary. For other types of information, the reader will want to consult other scholarly resources that provide what is needed. But no matter what other information is acquired from more traditional sources, without the type of sociocultural information offered here, it is highly doubtful one would find out what the authors of the Gospel documents were so concerned to say to their initial audiences.

General Social Dimensions of the Gospels: Some Presuppositions

There are several general social dimensions of the Gospels that emerge in the course of this book. They have mostly to do with the social purpose and function of the Gospel documents. These features are presupposed by the authors, who believe that stating these perspectives ahead of time will prove useful for understanding the Synoptic Gospels. That is especially so since they run counter to

much that is understood about the Gospels in the popular religious culture of our day. These include the following:

First of all, the focus of each Gospel document is the in-group. The Gospels present a retelling of the well-known (to the audiences) story of Jesus, for a specific Jesus group, in specific circumstances. In other words, the Gospels are not meant for outsiders but for members of the author's own Jesus group, hence for insiders.

Second, the Gospel documents are occasional writings. Given the fact that they were written for a specific Jesus group in specific circumstances, they can be described as "occasioned": written at a certain time to realize certain purposes and thus working to keep the in-group intact. In straightforward terms, the Gospels were not written for all people of all times.

Third, the Gospel documents are not concerned about the out-group. This means they are not documents for outsiders. They were not composed with the purpose of sharing them with other people to read, so that they might become Jesus-group members. On the contrary, they are documents to be read within specific groups to maintain those groups in their loyalty to God as revealed in the experience of Jesus. The themes that they emphasize are themes that the in-group found relevant to hear at certain times and in specific situations. For example, Mark's "secrecy," Matthew's "righteousness," and Luke's "spirit" are specific themes evidenced in these writings, and each addressed needs of the in-group at the moment the Gospel was written. In other words, the Gospels were not written for missionizing or proselytizing.

Fourth, the Gospel writings are not theological in content, purpose, or scope. That is, they are not explicitly concerned with articulating, expressing, unfolding, or explaining God, the nature of God, ideas or definitions of God—as theology usually is. First-century Mediterranean people, including Israelites, had no explicit religion: religion was not a discrete institution separate from other institutions in society. Rather, people of the time had domestic religion and political religion. The Gospels articulate Jesus' political religion for a later audience devoted to a domestic religion, that of Israelite brothers (and sisters) in Christ. In other words, the Gospel stories tell of Jesus' activity within a framework of Israelite politics: Jesus' program was one of proclaiming theocracy (kingdom of heaven) with God as Patron (father). Jesus was crucified as a political agitator. Those being addressed by the Gospel stories were later Jesus followers who had formed fictive kin groups with a religious agenda articulated in kinship terms; they were "brothers and sisters."

Fifth, the stories of Jesus told in the Synoptics are essentially meant to be narratives that might make sense of the experience of those hearing the stories. They are narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. And generally, narratives begin with an equilibrium, articulate a disturbed equilibrium, and then seek a restored equilibrium in the end. The presumption is that hearers of the story, various Jesus in-groups, lived in a situation of disturbed equilibrium. The story of Jesus is meant in the end to restore equilibrium in their lives, in their ongoing life story. Thus the story is meant to "carry" Jesus-group members, to help them make sense of their

experiences. It provides them with a fictive kin-group religion and offers them pegs on which to hang all of their experiences. In other words, the Gospels are not directly concerned with making sense of the experience of Jesus but with making sense of the lives of his followers.

Sixth, abstractly considered, the stories of Jesus in the Synoptics are each, in their own way, focused on what the God of Israel gives to faithful Israelites by means of Jesus (with the help of the apostles). As a rule, Jesus' opponents are Israelite elites and hostile spirits. Through Jesus, God is able to overcome them. In other words, the audiences of the Gospel stories, as faithful Israelites, identified with what God did to/for Israel through Jesus.

Seventh, and most specifically, the Gospels were written by and for third-generation Jesus-group members who wished to know about the first-generation experience that accounted for their own fictive kinship groups. The Gospels tell of what Jesus said and did in a way relevant to third-generation Jesus group members. Second-generation writers such as Paul or James or Peter say almost nothing about what Jesus said and did. Documents such as the Gospels that tell the story of a central personage located at the origins of some movement group are usually third-generation documents. In other words, from a social-scientific point of view, Luke's prologue (Luke 1:1-4) accurately describes the well-known third-generation principle: in a situation of radical and irreversible change, grandchildren wish to remember what children wished to forget of the experience of first-generation parents.

Materials Provided in This Book

Two types of material are provided in this book. First, by way of clarification, we offer short **Notes** commenting on each Gospel in canonical sequence. These draw the reader's attention to the encoding of the social system in the specific language of each Gospel. The **Notes** provide a kind of social-science commentary that can supplement the traditional studies available on Synoptic documents. Readers should also take note of parallel passages that offer multiple opportunities to read social-science comments on the same story or saying. Many sayings or stories are repeated in each of the three Gospels. Often the social dynamics at work will be the same in each version of a story or saying, though occasionally that is not the case, either because the material has been reworked by a writer to fit a different circumstance or because the wording chosen encodes different aspects of the social system. Comments on parallel passages therefore are often worth reading.

Second, we provide a collection of **Reading Scenarios** drawn from anthropological studies of the Mediterranean social system. This is the social system that has been encoded in the language of the Gospels in ways that are not always obvious to modern readers. Since most of the reading scenarios apply throughout the Gospels, however, we have duly cross-referenced them in the commentary for the convenience of the reader. Together with the **Notes**, the **Reading**

Scenarios offer clues for filling in the unwritten elements of the writing as a Mediterranean reader might have done and thereby help the modern reader develop a considerate posture toward the ancient author. You will see titles of our reading scenarios in boldface type (e.g., **Patronage System in Roman Palestine**) at locations where they add important information for understanding the commentary in the **Notes**. The reading scenarios are located at the back of the book and are organized alphabetically. An index of reading scenarios is also provided at the close of the book

Finally, the illustrations, maps, and diagrams included are intended to serve as a reminder that in reading the New Testament we are indeed in a different world. The scenarios which these and our written comments invoke, and which we ask the reader to understand, come from a time and place that for all of us remains on the far side of the Great Transformation. It is unlike anything we are likely to imagine from our experience in the modern West. It is a world we invite you to enter as a thoughtful and considerate reader.

Matthew

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- 1:18-25 Jesus' Birth
- 2:1-12 Honor Recognition for Jesus from the East
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II. 4:23–11:1

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- 4:23-25 Jesus' Reputation Begins to Spread
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I. 1:1—4:22

Presenting Jesus, Israel's Messiah

Legitimation of Jesus' Ascribed Honor (Genealogy) 1:1-17

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and

Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Textual Notes: Matt 1:1-17

1:1: Matthew begins with the words “*Biblos geneleos Jesou Christou . . .*” The title is a pun that has a variety of possible meanings: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Messiah,” or “The book of (the) Genesis of Jesus Messiah,” or “The book of the origin of Jesus Messiah . . .,” and the like. This opening pun connects with the last words of the work: “till the end of the age” (Matt 28:16), marking off the beginning and end. Moreover, the last passage of the work, an edict by the risen Jesus (Matt 28:18-20), closes the Gospel with the same type of passage that closes the Hebrew Scriptures, the edict of Cyrus in 2 Chron 36:23. Thus the Gospel begins with “the book of genesis” and ends with a final edict of one empowered by God, just like the Sacred Scriptures of Matthew’s day. Further, by beginning with a genealogy and closing with an edict, Matthew’s work likewise follows the pattern of last book of the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles. For Chronicles (called in Hebrew “The Book of Days” = genealogy) begins with a genealogy and ends with an edict from one with power over “all the kingdoms of the earth” (2 Chron 36:22-23; used by Ezra 1:1-2), namely, God’s Messiah, Cyrus (Isa 45:1; see Isa 44:28).

By whichever allusion, it appears that Matthew offers a new “scripture,” which goes all the way from the “beginning” to the “end.” In between these brackets, Jesus’ five major speeches (each ending with the refrain “When Jesus finished . . .”: Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) would have us think the new “scripture” is a new Torah from the new prophet, the new Moses, Jesus, son of David, Son of Abraham.

Such punning allusions were highly valued in the oral culture of the first-century Mediterranean world.

1:1-17: The importance of genealogies is easy for modern readers to underestimate. In antiquity, lineage was not only a source of pride, but also a device for self-aggrandizement. **Genealogies/Son of . . .** It was a claim to authority, to place, to political or civil rights, various social roles, or even the right to speak. Since genealogies justified privilege (office, inheritance, civil, political, and economic roles), they also were subject to considerable manipulation. Plutarch tells of a group of writers ingratiating themselves with noble Roman families by producing fictitious genealogies showing descent from Numa Pompilius (*Numa*. 21.2). To have a written pedigree, and especially a long one, was a mark of honor. It encoded the information people needed to know in order to place themselves and others properly in the social order.

A genealogy is thus a guide for social interaction. It informs participants whether they are interacting with superiors, inferiors, or equals. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus provides an example of the way this could affect behavior:

When they meet each other in the streets, you may know if the persons meeting are of equal rank by the following token: if they are, instead of speaking, they kiss each other on the lips. In the case where one is a little inferior to the other, the kiss is given on the cheek; where the difference of rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground. (*History* 1.134)

By tracing the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham, Matthew asserts his

social position as a true Israelite. The immediate mention of David is to underscore the Israelite and royal role of Jesus. By providing Jesus with this type of royal genealogy, Matthew has located him at the very top of the Israelite social honor scale, a position that “explains” how his subsequent career was so out of keeping with the honor status of a village artisan.

Note that in conflict situations, genealogies could be cited to put an

opponent in his place (see Matt 3:9). Also, in 13:55, when Jesus is challenged and insulted in his hometown of Nazareth, those who took offense at him did so by bringing up (1) his status as village artisan and (2) his genealogy.

Honor-Shame Societies.

Jesus' Birth 1:18-25