
Preface

Ten years have passed since the first edition of this *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. It was the first of its kind and we are delighted at the success that met that work. People interested in the Bible have told us often and in so many ways about how useful they have found our historical approach rooted in the social systems of the ancient Mediterranean world. We have heard from scholars, students, ordinary Bible readers, church groups, preachers, and pastors. All attested the utility of this volume as well as the *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Fortress, 1998) and the *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Fortress, 2000). Anticipated new volumes in the series we hope will extend this work to most of the New Testament.

Over those ten years we have continued to learn much about the social and cultural world of the Bible, thanks largely to our many colleagues in the Context Group. David Bossman, the editor of *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, once described Context Group members as “explorers not inventors, seekers not protagonists, path finders not preachers. The fruit of their work is apt for others to use, respecting the labors that produced them and the price of ignoring them. These works, then, are yet again foundations for biblical theology” (*BTB* 19 [1992] 50–51). It is the work of these Context Group colleagues, together with our own social and cultural studies over the past ten years, which we have attempted to include in the present volume.

As we have previously noted, the social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament is a “natural” approach for anyone who has gone through the experience of culture shock and eventually come to understand and appreciate another culturally distinct group of human beings. It becomes even more “natural” after prolonged exposure to traditional eastern Mediterranean people, among whom were the audiences of the New Testament documents.

The value of our commentary for modern life, we believe, is that it situates the modern Bible reader within a very ancient Christian tradition of Bible reading and study. According to that tradition, any application of the Bible, any appropriation of the Bible, any relevant use of the Bible, always had to be rooted in the literal meaning—in what the authors of biblical writings actually said, what these

authors actually meant. While a single meaning of a biblical document is unlikely to be available to us today, the range of plausible meanings includes those rooted in the social and cultural setting in which they were produced. That is because authors and audiences must share a horizon of expectations in order to communicate.

Our goal in this commentary is to help ordinary people touch base with these original meanings, and this by helping modern readers to enter the social system of first-century people. The usual approach in biblical studies and preaching is for biblical scholars to enter the presumed world of Jesus, learn about what people said, then come back and tell twenty-first century people what it was like. This is called exegesis. Our task is to take people in the twenty-first century and lead them back into the first-century Mediterranean, have them look around, so to say, and see how the natives saw and discover what those ancients were concerned about. This is a social-science approach.

We find this approach much fairer than the approach of those who would make the New Testament mean whatever they need it to mean in the twenty-first century. Such manipulation of the texts in the name of contextualization or appropriation or some other buzzword simply does violence to what our ancestors in faith witnessed. It leaves us unable to distinguish biblical voices from those that arise in our own twenty-first century culture.

Our text again is outfitted with photographs and charts along with appended descriptions. These have been put together by our colleague Thomas A. Hoffman, S.J., of Creighton University. We should like to thank him again for his contribution in making this volume more serviceable.

Once more, we are grateful to all those who have told us how useful they find this approach. We hope that the new information in this revised edition will serve them well in the task of understanding what the biblical authors said and meant to say to their contemporaries.

Bruce J. Malina
Richard L. Rohrbaugh