GOSPELS AND COMMUNITIES.
WAS MARK WRITTEN FOR A SUFFERING COMMUNITY?

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The aim of this essay is to seek to say something about "Mark's community," the community from which the writer of the second gospel came and (arguably) for which he wrote his gospel. However, some recent publications have cast serious doubts on the whole enterprise of seeking to identify specific communities lying behind the New Testament gospels. And so, in the first part of this essay, I offer a few remarks on these more general issues, seeking to defend the appropriateness of trying to identify the community to which a writer such as Mark may have belonged, and which he may be seeking to address via his gospel. In the second part of the essay, I will then raise the question of whether, if it is legitimate to think of a "Markan community," that community was a suffering community.

1. Gospels and Communities: Gospels for all Christians?

There has been a steadily growing trend over the last fifty years (or more) to assume as almost axiomatic that the gospels were written in and for specific communities. Further, it has become almost equally axiomatic to assume that a correct understanding of the community situation in which an evangelist was writing is crucial for an appropriate interpretation of the gospel which that evangelist has written. Within the (probably over-schematised) view of the development of gospel criticism, the source criticism of the nineteenth century gave way to the form criticism of the early twentieth century which in turn led on to the redaction criticism which has been so dominant (in various forms) since the mid-twentieth century. In this last phase, attention has been focused on the evangelists and their own contribution to the way in which the story of Jesus was presented. However in more recent years, several have stressed the importance of seeing the evangelists not just as isolated individuals, working alone in monastic cells or whatever. Rather, they have been seen as members of liv-
ing Christian communities. And, as often as not, it is the community situation which, it is argued, may have influenced the present form of the stories.\(^1\) Certainly too the trend to use more insights from the social sciences (a trend which has gathered pace since the 1970s) has led many to stress the importance of the social location of the evangelists in any assessment of their work.\(^2\) Thus the evangelists are to be seen as members of an individual community, working in that community and (to a certain extent) writing for that community. Many have therefore claimed that, in order to understand an individual gospel, it is necessary to have some awareness of the community situation from which it emerges and to which it is (or may be) addressed. Certainly many have claimed that this has proved fruitful, if not essential, for interpreting Matthew and John, as well as Mark and Luke.\(^3\)

This basic underlying assumption has however been radically challenged in a recent, influential collection of essays edited by Richard Bauckham and entitled *The Gospels for All Christians. Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*.\(^4\) Bauckham’s own essay, entitled “For whom were the Gospels written?” (pp. 9-49), forms the first in the

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\(^1\) This was, of course, the insight of the form of criticism (at least in relation to the smaller units of the tradition), though form criticism tended to work with a less specific idea of individual, separate communities. For the development of the ideas, and in part the scholarly language about *Sitz im Leben*, from older form criticism to more recent discussion of gospel communities, see S. Byrskog, “A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*. From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond,” ZNW 98 (2007), pp. 1-27.

\(^2\) Cf. e.g. John Riches’ comments in his *Matthew*, Sheffield 1996, p. 8, on how a book on Matthew today would differ from one written even a few years ago: one important difference would be the stress placed now on the community situation of the evangelist.
