Cedric E. W. Vine


In this revised doctoral thesis completed at the University of Sheffield, Cedric Vine sets out to deconstruct a minority view that has been gaining traction among Matthean scholars in recent years—namely, that the First Gospel was intended for a local Jewish-Christian or Christian-Jewish community, located, in all likelihood, in Antioch. The principal basis for his critique is that scholarly reconstructions of the local audience tend to be selective in their treatment of narrative features, such as plot and characterization, and generally overlook how the text might have been experienced aurally by other early Christian audiences. Therefore, an overhaul of the scholarly assumptions and practices that undergird such reconstructions is in order. Implicit in his critique of the local audience thesis is the view that the Gospels have been intended, more generally, for all Christians. Thus the burden of proof lies on those who would posit and reconstruct a local audience.

In Chapter 1, Vine outlines what he believes to be the current impasse regarding scholarly reconstructions of the local audience. The heart of this debate centers around Richard Bauckham’s influential book, The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), which advanced two important points. First, the genre of the Gospels, as Greco-Roman bios, indicates a much broader readership than, say, the Pauline epistles, which clearly assume a local audience. Second, early Christianity was not an independent or isolated movement, but consisted of a network of interdependent communities that maintained close contact. Both premises lead to the conclusion that the Gospels were intended for all Christians. This thesis has been vigorously debated, inter alia, by Philip Esler, Margaret Mitchell, Anders Runesson, and David Sim. Given the lack of consensus, Vine names three hermeneutical ambiguities that complicate the task of defining the audience. It is unclear whether the text should be read as reflecting (1) the implied author or the implied reader; (2) the implied reader or the real reader; (3) the time of Jesus or the time of Matthew’s composition. Any reconstruction of the Matthean community could potentially activate any number of combinations. Yet what many local audience reconstructions fail to do, according to Vine, is make these decisions transparent in the hermeneutical process.

Chapter 2 presents a critique of three major proponents for a local audience: Andrew Overman, Anthony Saldarini, and David Sim. Following a brief
summary of the local audience reconstructions of Overman, Saldarini, and Sim in Palestine, Syria, and Antioch, respectively. Vine proceeds with a more detailed assessment of how plot (e.g., narrative flow, causality, conflict analysis) and characterization (e.g., disciples, crowds, gentiles, Jewish leadership) function in each reconstruction. Vine’s critique, in short, is that these reconstructions do not adequately account for Matthew’s plot or characterization, resulting in “a reading strategy that treats the Gospel as a snapshot of the Matthean community’s situation at one particular point in time” (33). Moreover, no criteria are provided for delineating if, when, or how the Matthean text should be read as evidence from the time of Jesus or the time of the church. Chapter 3 provides an illustration of the argument from the previous chapter, focusing on the characterization of Peter. Vine’s larger point here is to underscore the selective nature involved in reconstructing the local audience. In essence, if local audience reconstructions are based on central characters in the plot such as Peter, the question arises, Which Peter? The Markan Peter or the Matthean Peter of “the Antiochene church during its transition from law-free to law-observant status” (82)? Problematically, however, local audience reconstructions are minimal in their treatment of Peter (80).

In Chapters 4-6, Vine continues his advance against the local audience thesis, but this time by considering the dynamics of oral performance and aural experience from the perspective of an audience. Could a first century audience actually differentiate orally and aurally between the Matthean and Markan Peters? This is a key question that subsequently frames the second half of the book. Chapter 4 draws on orality studies and performance criticism to construct what Vine refers to as a text-lector-audience communication model. This model has the advantage of foregrounding the experience of a heterogeneous but sympathetic audience who would have likely heard the text read aloud or performed by a lector. It also helps to move beyond the narrow text-based constructs of local audience reconstructions. With this model in place, Chapter 5 turns to prominent stories of Peter in Matthew and Mark. In particular, Vine focuses on how the temporal-spatial settings and narrative frames of these stories shape the aural experience of the audience. Vine examines a number of passages in Matthew (Matt 14:22-33; 15:1-20; 16:13-28; 17:1-8, 24-27; 18:1-35; 19:23-30; 26:30-35, 36-46, 58, 69-75), in contrast to their Markan counterparts, to conclude that while audiences would share points of contact with the stories, they would not have heard anything overtly specific to their situation. Chapter 6 concludes the investigation into aural experience by way of examining the text’s impact on the audience. The argument, in short, is that early Christian audiences were heterogeneous and would therefore have