

Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John. By Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, x + 326 pp., \$19.00.*

The sequel to the authors' *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, the present work applies recent sociological insights to the study of John's gospel. This is done in form of a selective commentary on various features of background. Taking their cue from Halliday (1978), the writers characterize John's language as "antilanguage," that is, "the language of an 'antisociety' . . . set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it" (p. 7). John's community, according to Malina and Rohrbaugh, was viewed by its opponents as "either on the margins of prevailing norms or laws or transgressed these" (p. 9), with John's antilanguage constituting "a form of resistance to this range of competing groups" (p. 10). Decrying common "[e]thnocentric and anachronistic readings" (p. 16), the authors set out to "provide the reader with fresh insight into the social system shared by the unknown author of the Gospel of John and his original, first-century Mediterranean audience" (p. 19).

Throughout the commentary, scenarios or conceptual schemes are suggested that a first-century reader would allegedly have conjured up, be they related to honor and shame, social class or conflict, or various ceremonies, ritual or major institutions of the time. The authors justify their social-scientific approach, first, by maintaining that "meanings derive from social systems" (p. 20). Second, they claim that "models operate at a level of abstraction somewhat above that of historical inquiry" (p. 20). Thus they offer "not a complete and literary and historical commentary" on John's Gospel but rather a "simplified social-scientific commentary" (p. 21). To aid the reader, the authors supply "reading scenarios" drawn from anthropological studies of the Mediterranean social system. Short "notes" comment on specific passages of the Gospel. Finally, there are maps, illustrations and diagrams as well as a (highly idiosyncratic) appendix breaking down the Gospel into smaller units.

I have spelled out the underlying assumptions of this work in some detail in order to show that the present volume is anything but mainstream. Rather, the authors' highly doubtful presuppositions and their commitment to the primacy of a social-scientific method dominate the actual commentary to an extent that it turns out to be of fairly limited value to the general (largely uninitiated) readership. This is not the place to register in detail the concerns against the rigorous application of a social-scientific approach to Biblical studies. The reader is invited to peruse for himself the somewhat strange, often imbalanced presentation of the background to John's gospel. Suffice it to say that the theological apprehension of this Gospel's message seems more often than not to be, not enhanced, but submerged under sociological data provided by the authors. Helpful features such as matters or archaeology, OT, or Greco-Roman literary parallels are blended with more esoteric "study aids."

For example, John 1:35–51 is "illuminated" by a full-page chart contrasting "Liminality," "Society" and "Antisociety." Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is set in the context of "fictive kinship" and "ascribed honor." Chapter 5 is discussed in terms of patronage, brokerage, honor/shame or challenge/riposte. What in the title of the book might lead a prospective buyer and user to expect helpful treatment of background features relevant for the study of John's Gospel turns out at a closer look to be an attempt at validating the authors' social-scientific methodology, models, and theories. It should

also be noted that the book thins out considerably when dealing with the second half of John's Gospel: while 187 pages are devoted to chaps. 1–12, only 76 pages are given to chaps. 13–21. Overall, I would caution readers not to buy the present volume but to wait instead for the four-volume *Illustrated Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, forthcoming from Zondervan in late 2001, which will feature a more balanced, relevant treatment of background issues.

Andreas J. Köstenberger
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

*This review first appeared in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2000): 144–45 and is posted with permission.