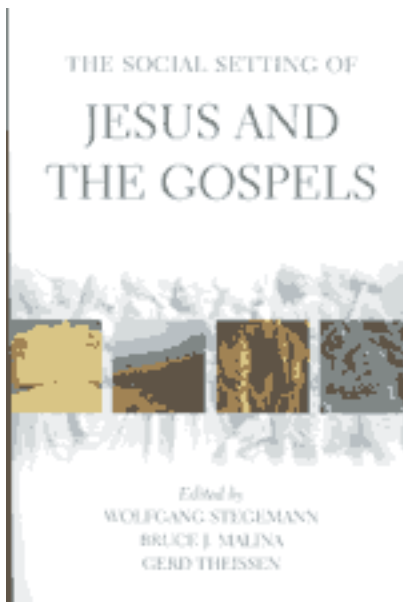


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**Malina, Bruce J., Gerd Theissen, and Wolfgang Stegemann, eds.**

*The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*

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This collection includes nineteen essays presented at the fourth international meeting of the Context Group that met in Tutzing, Germany in June 1999. The basic question of that colloquium (and hence the basic question of the volume) was (is): “What can one, with the help of historically informed social-scientific models, know about the ‘historical’ Jesus from the New Testament that cannot be known by other approaches?” (vii). In the volume, this question is pursued in four different areas of research: social-psychological perspectives, social-boundary concerns, politics and political religion, and politics and political economy.

This fourfold investigation is first preceded by three introductory essays offered by the conveners of the colloquium related to the overarching topic of the historical Jesus and the social sciences (Bruce Malina, “Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research” [3–26]; Richard Rohrbaugh, “Ethnocentrism and Historical Questions about Jesus” [27–44]; and, Wolfgang Stegemann, “The Contextual Ethics of Jesus” [45–61]).

The first section of the book includes four essays written from “social-psychological” perspectives. Andries van Aarde (“Jesus as Fatherless Child” [65–84]) argues that the public perception of Jesus as “fatherless” would have led to his marginalization within Jesus’ own religious context, thus identifying him with other social outcasts. As a result,

Jesus referred to God as “Father” since he was prevented socially from referring to himself as a “child of Abraham.” Stuart L. Love (“Jesus Heals the Hemorrhaging Woman” [85–101]) “asses[es] the historicity of the healing story of the hemorrhaging woman in Matt 9:20–22, primarily by means of a cross-cultural anthropological analysis” (85). Love concludes that this is a healing not of an autonomous woman but of one whose relationships with families and communities is now restored (98). John J. Pilch (“Altered States of Consciousness in the Synoptics” [103–15]) argues that the historical Jesus was a holy man, a “shaman,” and as such, would have regularly experienced “altered states of consciousness” (ASC) as well as being the subject of ASC events. Perhaps the strongest contribution in this section is that of Christian Strecker (“Jesus and the Demoniacs” [117–33]), who concludes that demonic possession and exorcisms in the ministry of Jesus were “performances” and “transformances.” In other words, possession was not a subjective and “purely internal occurrence” (119) but rather an event where “the possessed person activates dramatically in public the role that society regards as indicating possession” (122–23)—what Strecker calls “performance.” Jesus responds to this “performance” with “transformation,” where “possession itself undergoes a performative change” (125).

The second area of social-scientific research through which the historical Jesus is analyzed is that of social boundaries. This second section of essays explores this specific social-scientific approach to the historical Jesus. Like John Pilch, Richard E. DeMaris (“The Baptism of Jesus: A Ritual-Critical Approach” [137–57]) investigates altered-states-of-consciousness approaches, this time looking at the account of Jesus’ baptism. While it was common in the ancient world for the manifestation of altered states of consciousness (or “spirit possession”) to be “triggered by ritual activity” (147), DeMaris concludes that “Jesus’ visionary experience is historically very likely, [but] the baptismal rite (or any other rite) in conjunction with it is less so” (151). In his essay “The Politics of Exorcism” (159–74), Santiago Guijarro argues that the episodes of the Beelzebul accusations (Mark 3:22–27 par.; Q 11:14–23 par.) belong to a “broader strategy, whose purpose [by the historical Jesus’ opponents] was to discredit Jesus, to declare him an outsider in his society, and to assign him a new identity” (171–72). In “The Historical Jesus and Honor Reversal at the Table,” S. Scott Bartchy argues that the historical Jesus “sought to undermine traditional meal practices that provided easy opportunities for males in his culture to seek [and display] honor” (182). Thus, the historical Jesus used the venue of meals and table fellowship for the “[socially] outrageous giving of honor of all, around a radically inclusive table” (182). In his analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Philip F. Esler approaches the historical Jesus from the standpoint of his breaking down of various “social categorizations” in his portrayal by Luke (“Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict” [185–205]). In the end, Esler

concludes that since the “breaking down [of] divisions between Judeans and Gentiles” is a regular feature of Luke-Acts, it is unlikely that the parable is authentic. In the concluding essay in this section, Annette Weissenrieder (“The Plague of Uncleanness? The Ancient Illness Construct ‘Issue of Blood’ in Luke 8:43–48” [207–22]) argues that unlike the parallel account in Mark 5:25–34, Jesus is portrayed as healer in Luke’s account of the hemorrhaging woman. This is the case since in Luke, the “medical and social implications [of the account] take on greater importance than ritualistic implications” (218). As a result, Weissenrieder is able to conclude that the theme of Luke 8:43–48 “is not the plague of uncleanness, but the ‘plague’ of illness” (219).

The third major section of the volume includes four essays that look at the historical Jesus within the social-scientific areas of politics and political religion, and it is perhaps the strongest section in the book. Gerd Theissen, in his very helpful essay “The Political Dimension of Jesus’ Activities” (225–50), argues that the historical Jesus was faced with the political implications around the then “popular expectations that he should be the messianic ruler” (243). The historical Jesus “contradicts such expectations by refusing a politics based on the use of force,” employs instead “symbolic actions [that] have political effect,” and establishes the “rule of God” in the “humane rulership” of his disciples as sorts of “tribal kings who are generous to their enemies and who consider their rule as a service and occasion for peacemaking” (243). In his essay “The Political Jesus: Discipleship and Disengagement” (251–81), T. Raymond Hobbs argues that the common description of Jesus’ words and actions through the models of “political activism” and “social change” is anachronistic. Instead, Jesus’ words and actions should be analyzed through the political model of “disengagement,” where Jesus is involved in “social inversion” in his “flattery of authorities, the stealing of language (‘antilanguage’), the development and nurture of the inner group, and avoidance of unnecessary trouble” (274). K. C. Hanson analyzes social banditry in the Mediterranean world of the first century in his essay “Jesus and the Social Bandits” (283–97). Hanson argues that New Testament scholarship needs to take more seriously a social banditry model (in particular, the work done by Richard Horsley), since it can prove to be particularly helpful in the study of Jesus’ teachings and the events leading up to his death. In the final essay in this section (“The Jesus Movement and Network Analysis” [301–32]), Dennis C. Duling outlines a model of “network analysis” to analyze the historical Jesus, one that incorporates both the “spatial” and “social” networks of first-century Galilee to “help conceptualize . . . Jesus’ geographical and social context and Jesus’ social relationships” (301).

Just two essays make up the concluding section of the book: “Politics and Political Economy.” Douglas E. Oakman, in “Money in the Moral University of the New Testament” (335–48), argues that, for the historical Jesus, “money was at the heart of evil

apart from God's rule" (347). Thus, the "Jesus traditions retain an echo of a vigorous critique of political economy and its exploitative monetary system in the interests of urging the alternative 'network' of the kingdom of God, with exchanges of goods organized through principles of generalized reciprocity" (347). In his essay "Gifts, Tributes, and Offerings" (349–64), Gary Stansell looks at the economic and social activity of gift giving, an activity required by Jesus of his followers. This was an activity that conferred honor and reflected the reciprocity of patrons and clients, with the giving of alms establishing "a fictive kinship that operates according to generalized reciprocity . . . [since] close family members do not need to return gifts" to the alms-giver (360).

The volume closes with an essay by Albert Verdoodt comparing and contrasting the conclusions of the subsequent essays with social-scientific approaches to Paul, his letters, and his churches ("The Gospels in Comparison with the Pauline Letters: What We Can Learn from Social-Scientific Models" [367–77]).

As with any collection of essays by different authors, the degree to which each essay in this volume is helpful and compelling varies. And as with all contemporary social-scientific models used to analyze the texts and people of ancient worlds and cultures, there is the danger of "overanachronism" where contemporary models are superimposed to the point where they seem artificially forced on ancient individuals and texts. But in the end, while the quality and strength of the essays do vary in this collection, it is, on the whole, a tremendously beneficial and insightful study, particularly given its unique approach in looking at the historical Jesus through various social-scientific models. It is recommended to all those interested in current investigations of the historical Jesus, particularly those that are attempting to take seriously the social and cultural world of Jesus and his first followers.