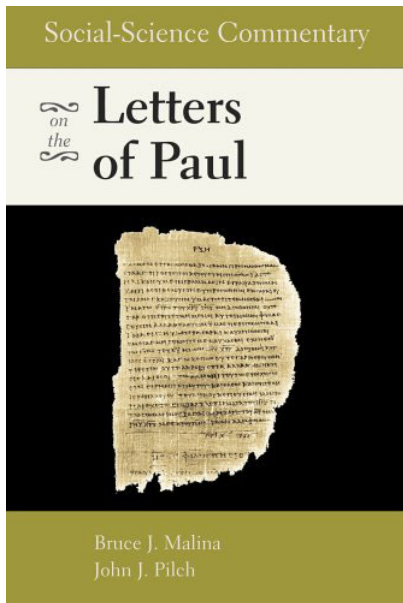


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Malina, Bruce J., and John J. Pilch

Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul

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As Malina and Pilch point out at the onset of their work, there are so many commentaries on the letters of Paul already in existence that one might wonder why another should be added to this overabundance. Malina and Pilch, however, feel justified in their enterprise since they present a fresh new approach to Paul's authentic letters. Many commentaries have been written from a theological or religious orientation, while some use linguistic or philological approaches. Malina and Pilch's commentary is distinct in their use of the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, social psychology, sociolinguistics). Their overall goal is to present "the most culturally plausible interpretation of Paul's letters" (ix) and not, for example, to assess Paul's pertinence for today's church.

As such, the commentary tries to bridge the gap that exists between twenty-first-century readers of Paul and the first-century documents. At the heart of its methodology lies the conviction that the New Testament was written in "a 'high context' culture" (5), that is, a society in which "people who communicate with each other ... presume a broadly shared, generally well-understood knowledge of the context of anything referred to in conversation or in writing" (5). As a consequence, when communicating, people of high-context cultures take shortcuts because they do not feel they need to explain every term or every allusion, since their interlocutors share the same basic culture. In opposition,

American culture is a low-context society that produces “highly specific and detailed documents that leave relatively little for the reader to fill in or supply” (7). According to the authors, when readers of a low-context society encounter writings of a high-context culture (like the Bible), misunderstandings and misinterpretations are unavoidable, because the low-context readers “erroneously assume the authors have provided all of the contextual information needed to understand [the Bible]” (8). To correct this problem, Malina and Pilch argue that providing the right context for the information transmitted in Paul’s letters will improve the understanding of the epistles and provide a “considerate reading” of the epistles (1).

The commentary attempts to provide new insights for a respectful reading of Paul’s epistles using three techniques. It opens with a general introduction about the letters of Paul and corrects common and scholarly misinterpretations of Paul. It continues with textual notes that, in form (if not in content), resemble traditional commentaries. It ends with readings scenarios that “offer clues for filling in the unspoken or implicit elements of the writing as a Mediterranean reader would certainly have done” (x).

The most striking example of misinterpretation of Paul being corrected in the commentary concerns the traditional distinction between Jew and Greek. Malina and Pilch are eager to get rid of this division, aiming to replace it with the tandem Judean/Hellenist. They argue that “Greek” as an ethnic category did not exist in the first-century world. It was, in fact, the “general designation for ‘civilized’, living in a Hellenistic way” (371). Therefore, it is necessary to understand “Greek” in Israelite contexts (and thus in Paul) as “an Israelite ingroup generic designation for Israelites residents outside Judea in Hellenistic areas” (372). By the same token, *Ioudaios* cannot designate Jew, because Jews only came into existence after the fifth century with the Babylonian Talmud. *Ioudaios* refers in fact to “pertaining to Judea” (371).

If one respects these definitions, central to the Mediterranean world in the first century, Paul is not the apostle to the Gentiles, as has been long believed, but he remains an ingroup worker trying to reach Israelites living in non-Israelites parts of the world. Paul’s task was exclusively Israelite in nature (12). This conviction is repeated at several points of the introduction and the reading scenarios, and it permeates the interpretation of the letters: “Paul’s obvious addressees were his fellow Israelites” (14). It is in fact anachronistic to think of a universalistic Pauline mission, since Paul, as a good representative of first-century Mediterranean culture was deeply ethnocentric. It is also important to note that the Israelites, especially when they lived in the Greek colonies, did not distinguish themselves from non-Israelite neighbors in any striking fashion. Rather, they were pretty much assimilated into the local Hellenistic culture: “Israelites both in Palestine and in

Israelites colonies were far more enmeshed in Hellenistic culture than had been previously thought possible” (17).

In its organization, the commentary is somewhat impractical because the reader should be able to read the “reading scenarios” along with the textual notes, since these scenarios are constantly referred to in the textual notes. At the same time, if readers start with the “reading scenarios,” they lose many of the precise indications carried by the textual notes. Once the reader gets past this difficulty (and the abundance of social-science jargon used in the book), the reader may become divided emotionally between a feeling of excitement and a sense of frustration: excitement at all the possibilities for new interpretations opened by Malina and Pilch’s observations; frustration because the reading hypotheses are often times overstated, giving the impression that the assumptions made about the world of the first century are hard facts or evidence, when in fact they remain scientific reconstructions. As a consequence, the clearly stated agenda of the book sometimes clouds the analysis and leads the authors astray from the purpose they had stated for themselves (a “considerate reading”) toward a reading dominated by a methodology that should only be the servant of interpretation.