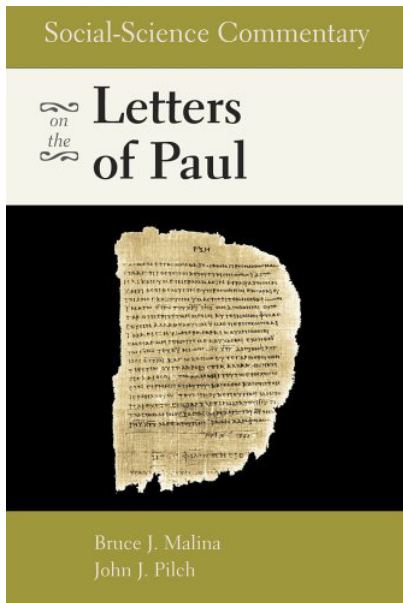


RBL 11/2007



Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch

Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. x + 419. Paper. \$27.00.
ISBN 0800636406.

Eduard Verhoef
Maartensdyk, The Netherlands

For many years biblical scholars have seen the significance of social sciences for the exegesis of biblical documents and for insight into the oldest history of Christianity. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, who published *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* in 2000, finished a commentary on the seven “authentic letters of the Apostle Paul” (1) in 2006. Malina and Pilch join “modern scholars” who “have determined that only seven of these letters are authentic” (1). The authenticity of the other “Paulines” is not discussed. This means that 2 Thessalonians, for example, is not considered in this study. The seven authentic letters are explained in the order in which they are supposed to have been written. Accordingly, Malina and Pilch start with 1 Thessalonians, then discuss the Corinthian correspondence and subsequently Galatians, Romans, Philippians, and the Epistle to Philemon.

The larger part of the book provides an explanation of the Pauline letters (27–329). This part is preceded by an introduction (1–25) and followed by a chapter on “Reading Scenarios” (331–409). Especially the first chapter is essential because it describes the methodology used in the commentary. In the chapter on “Reading Scenarios” various subjects are discussed, such as “Death and Resurrection,” “Greeks and Israelites,” “Kingdom of God,” “Social Identity,” and so forth.

The authors' methodology is decisive for the explanation of many texts. They argue that "reading is fundamentally a social act" (2). "Meanings are embedded in a social system shared and understood by all participants in any communication process" (2). This may be true, but it makes the task for exegetes all the more difficult, since they must bridge the gap between the audience of the first century and the people of the twenty-first century. Malina and Pilch are aware of these difficulties. All readers and exegetes are handicapped by what is called "selective perception" (5). Because of this "selective perception," errors can easily be made in the explanation of Pauline texts. According to Malina and Pilch, an important error often made is to consider the apostle Paul, the author of these epistles, as an apostle to the Gentiles. They argue as follows: "It is very important to reflect on a fact of social psychology that, in ingroup contexts, any Israelite 'going to the other peoples' would be presumed to be going to Israelites resident among those other peoples" (7). "Paul was, in fact, apostle to Israelite minorities living among non-Israelite majority populations" (7). But which arguments do they have to support their opinion? In my view, "a fact of social psychology" is insufficient to prove this reasoning. Malina and Pilch are of course aware of many texts in the New Testament that seem to say the opposite, but they try to escape this difficulty by a striking exegesis of these texts. According to them, Paul's proclamation is an Israelite theocracy that "was meant specifically for Israelites" (12). Hence his audience consisted of "his fellow Israelites" (14). According to Malina and Pilch, Paul's concern exclusively for Israelites is no different from Jesus' viewpoint in his commissioning the apostles at the end of the Gospel (Matt 28:19): make disciples of all nations. For Malina and Pilch, these words "of course" mean "of Israelites living among all nations" (17). Especially the adverb "of course" shows that the "fact of social psychology" mentioned above prescribes their explanation of Matt 28:19. But this is not what is written there. What is written in Matt 28:19 contradicts their interpretation. In my opinion, this is not the way we should interpret texts from centuries ago. We should read very carefully what is written, and our presuppositions should not determine beforehand that the evident meaning of a text cannot be meant.

Concluding the introduction, the authors sum up "the prevailing modes of interpreting Paul's letters" (24), comparing them to their own view. I mention one of them, which is related to their statement mentioned above. According to the received view, "Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles," but in the authors' view, "Paul is the apostle to Israelites living among non-Israelite peoples outside Judea" (25).

Let us have a look at the consequences of these statements for their exegesis. The first epistle they discuss is 1 Thessalonians. In Thessalonica, as elsewhere, Paul approached the Jews in order to preach the gospel. In this way he could reach non-Jews as well. In 1 Thess 1:9 it is said that the addressees "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (36). The authors say that these words point to members of Paul's Israelite audience: "The

presumption that these were non-Israelites is simply misplaced for two reasons: Paul's target audience consisted of Israelites, and many Israelites resident among non-Israelites were far along the way of assimilation, including adopting local worship patterns" (38). The Greek verb translated by Malina and Pilch as "turn to (God) from (idols)" is used, for example, in 2 Cor 3:16 and, with another preposition, in Acts 9:35; 14:15; 15:19; 26:20. I dismiss the possibility that these words refer to Israelites "far along the way of assimilation." These verses refer to Gentiles who accepted the preaching of the gospel. In my opinion, the same must be said with respect to 1 Thess 1:9.

I have a similar problem with their exegesis of Rom 15:16 and Gal 2:7. In Rom 15:16 Paul calls himself a minister to the Gentiles. Malina and Pilch speak with respect to these words of the "Israelites among the Gentiles" (289). In Gal 2:7 it is said that Paul had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, meaning, according to the authors, for the "Israelites living among the 'Foreskins'" (194). It is impossible and unnecessary to discuss more texts within the scope of this review. The question is if it is right that presumptions deducted from the social sciences dominate so strongly the exegesis of writings from nearly two thousand years ago. I do not think so.

A comparable question, connected with the problem mentioned above, arises in the last chapter, "Reading Scenarios," where the terms *Jew* and *Greek* are discussed (364–66, 371–74). The authors argue that *Greek* "was the general designation for 'civilized', living in a Hellenistic way" (371). It is well known that the word *Greek* can be used in the sense of "civilized," especially if it occurs with "barbarian" (Rom 1:14), but this does not mean that the word *Greek* in the Pauline literature points to "Israelites in Roman Hellenistic cities" (371). Malina and Pilch are convinced that *Greeks* in the Pauline letters "were Israelites in Roman Hellenistic cities" (371). They argue "that there was no 'Greece' in the first-century Mediterranean" (372) or "that there was no region or nation called Greece in the first-century Mediterranean" (365). But in Acts 20:2 *Greece* can have no other meaning than the geographic area. The same is true for many texts in the profane literature. Consequently, the paragraphs on the terms *Jew* and *Greek* should be used very cautiously.

Other paragraphs in this part of the book can be helpful and instructive. In a section on "Death and Resurrection" (349–51) it is argued that the expectation of the resurrection of the dead "derived from Persia, undoubtedly part and parcel of the ideology of the Persian scribes responsible for the foundation of Jerusalem and Judea." I wonder if this can be said so absolutely, but it is important to pay attention to the Persian traditions in this regard. A paragraph on "Small-Group Development" (397–400) shows how "small groups go through a process entailing a number of stages of development" (398). These stages are labeled "Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning." Although such a development cannot prescribe what happened, for example, in Thessalonica or Philippi, it

can be very helpful to understand the difficulties that arose very soon (see Phil 4:2–3). The last paragraph I want to mention is the one discussing the “Son of God” (401–3). It is right that they explain the phrase “Son of God” against the background of the Jewish Scriptures. According to Malina and Pilch, this phrase means “having the quality of God” (401). It can denote both angels and human beings, “persons in some special relationship with God as well as those who perform deeds of divine quality.” Paul’s use of this term “must be explained by some extraordinary event or circumstance, and this was the resurrection effected by the God of Israel” (402–3).

I conclude that the book by Malina and Pilch is easy to read and has interesting paragraphs, but lay readers must be very cautious because they are confronted with very controversial opinions and statements they cannot check. It is regrettable that indices are not included in this daring study.