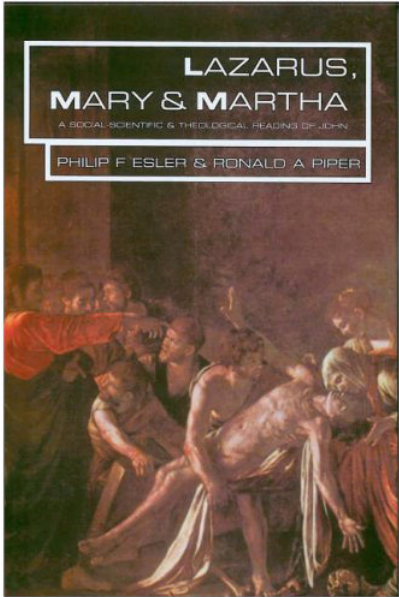


RBL 01/2008



**Esler, Philip F., and Ronald A. Piper**

***Lazarus, Mary and Martha: A Social-Scientific and Theological Reading of John***

London: SCM, 2006. Pp. vi + 201. Cloth. £29.99. ISBN 0334040167.

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In this co-authored volume, Philip Esler and Ronald Piper apply their well-honed social-scientific approaches to the Gospel of John's account of the raising of Lazarus and Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha. The book is well-argued and offers a compelling presentation of what the authors see as the inauguration of "a new approach to Lazarus, Mary and Martha in the Fourth Gospel." This approach consists primarily of implementing the social-scientific approaches advocated by Neyrey, Malina, and Rohrbaugh, among others (17), and adding to these social-identity theory as developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (25). The composite methodology presents the three siblings as Johannine prototypes, or exemplars, with whom future Christians can identify. What is less obvious is the influence of Esler's own New Testament theology, which provides the rationale for intercultural communion—the bridge, for the authors, between the text and the modern reader.

Chapter 1 sets out the aims of the book: to explore the Lazarus narrative of John 11–12 through the lens of social-scientific criticism. This means that the final form of the text will be explored, although with a clear understanding that other hands may lie beneath the surface of the text and including some later discussion about Synoptic influence and layering of the text. Moreover, since social-scientific criticism demands close attention to

the context within which a text is written, the authors reject Bauckham's "Gospel for all Christians" approach in favor of a Fourth Gospel written to a specific Johannine grouping that sees itself distinct from other Christian and Jewish groupings. In other words, the authors follow Malina and Rohrbaugh in seeing John's community as an antisociety that makes use of antilanguage, their own unique brand of speech that, at least in Malina's version of antilanguage, sets this community apart from other groups. However, the authors choose not to specify any further detail; no attempt is made to determine the physical location of the community or a possible date of composition for the Gospel, despite the possibility that both factors could affect the contextualization of the Gospel. In fact, there is a good deal of assumption here, as is understandable when the authors have more important arguments to make. But this means that the Context Group approach to sociolinguistics and to socioscientific approaches generally is uncritically accepted with no pointers for the reader that there might be alternative views within Johannine scholarship.

The authors continue to set the agenda by establishing the focus text as John 11:1–44, with 10:40–42; 11:45–54; and 12:1–19 providing more context. The authors then assess the importance of the narrative within the structure of the Gospel and the key contributors to previous research on this passage from Dodd to Hakola. Of course, a full literature review is beyond the scope of the book, and as such major authors and contributions on Lazarus in particular and the Gospel of John in general are omitted. Once again, broad generalizations are made and key contributions are omitted in favor of a briefer work and the highlighting of the authors' own publications. By the end of the first chapter, having categorized earlier interpretations as either christological or soteriological, the authors introduce a new reading of the passage that picks up those readings that see Lazarus and, on occasion, Martha and Mary as representative characters within the text. Indeed, the authors state at this point the major argument of the volume: the three siblings as "prototypes of identity for Christ-followers."

The second chapter reintroduces social-scientific approaches to the Fourth Gospel before briefly introducing social-identity theory (25), stereotyping, and "self-categorization theory." There is much here that may be new to the reader, and good signposts are given to further reading. These theories are then applied to group identity and the role of prototypes in creating social history (29, 32). We are then told that the "broad relevance of social identity theory to the Fourth Gospel is easily demonstrated" (38). The authors do this by a brief discussion of the use of the term *Ioudaioi*, reinforced by an appendix at the end of the volume. However, there is no discussion of alternative views. Regardless of whether there was a Mediterranean culture that was more group-orientated than an individualistic contemporary North Atlantic cultures, John's Gospel can be seen as the most individualistic of the Gospels. It is this Gospel that repeatedly singles out named

individuals and their response to the Jesus: John, Philip, Nathanael, and Nicodemus in the first three chapters. Even the unnamed characters stand out as individuals in their own right with nonprototypical characteristics: the mother of Jesus, the master of the banquet, the Samaritan woman, the royal official, and the man at the pool of Bethzatha. While each of these individuals can represent prototypes of how to respond to Jesus, they do not blend into prototypical conformity or group identity; they represent atypical characters who experience individual encounters with Jesus and make appropriate or inappropriate responses to these encounters. This is a point to which we will need to return.

Chapter 3 shows how the Fourth Gospel counters received tradition about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and offers a new reading of that tradition. This new reading asserts a prototypical role for them within the Christian community. While it is accepted that John made use of underlying traditions, the creativity of the Johannine author is emphasized: “an audacious attempt by the evangelist to rework the collective memory of the Christ-movement” (56). As such, John takes a “congeries of pre-existing elements” and fashions the Bethany narrative as a prelude to the anointing story of John 12:1–9 in order to introduce a prototypical family who are both loved by Jesus and who love him in return (58). Highlighting apparent inconsistencies within the narrative, the authors seek to show how the important teaching is the prototypical nature of friendship, or the love command, for the Christian community, as evidenced by the Lazarus family group. In John 11 Jesus shows his love for the family, and in John 12 Mary evidences her love for Jesus by anointing him with a portion of the myrrh that she has reserved for his burial (69). While another appendix expands on the understanding that the perfume was myrrh and not nard, the authors pursue the discussion that Mary kept back the majority of the myrrh for later use and handed this over to Nicodemus, as a socially more acceptable carrier than a member of the Lazarus family (71). There are some major interpretative leaps to be made in this section of the work, and it is interesting that they are pursued, since a good deal of this chapter reflects neither on the core text of John 11:1–44 nor on the prototypical role of the family group.

In the next chapter the authors explore the role of the Lazarus family as prototypes (or exemplars, if they are to be seen as actual historical identities) and the role of the Bethany narratives as an attempt to attain “permanent lodgement in the collective memory of this group” (79). Exploring Lazarus first, the authors outline the importance of his ongoing relationship with Jesus, which once again focuses on the role of friendship with the assumed Johannine community (83). In fact, this discussion of friendship is one of the major strengths of this volume, as well as the brief discussion of the influence of a domestic setting for pre-Constantinian Christianity. Moreover, the discussion of Lazarus as a prototypical Christian is convincing. The characterization of Lazarus, compared with

other named individuals in this Gospel, gives few personal details. This lack of individuation and the fact that he appears solely within the Bethany narratives suggest that he is representing a prototypical element of Christian discipleship rather than this being an individual testimony. However, the argument for the prototypicality of Martha and Mary is less convincing, not least because of the apparent use of Synoptic tradition somewhere behind the Johannine text, as well as the specifics of the conversation and Mary's singular act of anointing (86). Finally, the authors discuss the prototypicality of the family as a whole (89) as precursors of the Johannine community itself: those who are friends of and are befriended by Jesus gathered within the context of a home (103).

The final two chapters focus on the raising of Lazarus as a prototypical act in itself. The prototypicality lies not in the christological aspect, that it is Jesus who gives life, but in the pastoral aspect, that it is life that Jesus gives, even when death is accepted as a reality for the Christian community. Lazarus's revivification, therefore, offers hope to those in the Johannine community that their own dead will also receive life; indeed, the fact that Jesus delays his arrival until Lazarus has died is prototypical in itself in that it teaches the Johannine community to accept death as a reality. This is an important pastoral insight for the modern Christian community as well.

The impact of Lazarus's raising is shown graphically in the final chapter, which explores funerary art from pre-Constantinian catacombs in Rome in which depictions of Lazarus being raised by from the dead by Jesus are very common. The authors argue that Lazarus is here a symbol of the hope of resurrection or of life after death for those who have died within the Christian community. Of course, the evidence from the catacombs could be read in other ways, not least to focus on the role of Jesus (always depicted more prominently than Lazarus) as the one who raises from the dead and in the symbolism of Jesus as Hermes, healer and deliverer of souls. Intriguingly, the evidence from the catacombs throws other elements of this work into question. There seems to be little evidence of the importance of the Lazarus family as a prototypical unit. The funerary art in the catacombs seems to focus on Jesus' ability to raise the dead and on Lazarus's role as an individual recipient of the gift of life. So, Lazarus is usually the only member of the family represented, and in the one example given where Mary also appears, she is placed at Jesus' feet, suggesting a merging of the two acts of individuation—the raising of Lazarus and Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet—rather than their prototypicality as a family. If John was seeking “permanent lodgement in the collective memory” for the Lazarus family as a unit, he did not achieve his goal.

Clearly, this is an important book in the ongoing discussion of the role of social-scientific theory in Johannine scholarship. Its importance lies not in the argument that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are representative characters for Christian discipleship, since few

would argue that they were not. What is important is the careful argumentation, the close attention to the text, and the unswerving conviction that social-identity theory and the lessons learned from social-scientific readings of the Johannine Gospel present new insights into this most intriguing and at times beguiling text. Moreover, it takes seriously the potential impact of this ancient text on the theological presuppositions of the modern reader. This is certainly a text with which students and scholars at all levels will wish to engage.