

REVIEW ARTICLE: *GALATIANS*, BY PHILIP F. ESLER

Mark Bonnington

I. Introduction

Philip Esler's new contribution to the Routledge NT Readings series¹ is one of the boldest and most comprehensive attempts to use social scientific methods to shed new light on a NT text. In his study of Galatians, Esler examines a letter that has been subject not only to much renewed theological analysis in the light of the 'new perspective on Paul' but has also been a central locus of rhetorical criticism.

Professor Esler's *Galatians* is a guide to the main interpretative problems of the letter. The plan of the book is to deal with questions of 'introduction' and then with the main issues in the order that they arise within Paul's letter itself. Bracketing this detailed engagement with the text are introductory and concluding chapters that elucidate Esler's interpretative assumptions and his suggested hermeneutical model. Esler takes the opportunity to make a new hermeneutical proposal for a Christian reading of the text, a hermeneutic that he calls 'interculturalism'.

In the introduction (chapter 1), Esler clarifies his interpretative method: he is against historicist and theological readings of the letter and wishes to stress the culturally embedded nature of the letter. He prefers a historical approach supplemented with new insights from anthropological and sociological studies. It is this agenda that shapes the method of the whole book—the combination of traditional exegetical method with recent social anthropological theory. Although he introduces bits of social scientific theory throughout the book, the main presentation is in chapter 2 where he outlines social identity theory and group conflict theory. These have obvious relevance to the rhetoric and context of the Galatian controversy. In describing the crisis in Galatia Esler is less interested in tracing its roots in the

¹ *Galatians* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1998).

development of Paul's relationship with Peter than in stressing the need for Paul to develop the group identity of the Galatian believers over against both Jewish and gentile out-groups (chapter 3).

Esler then revisits the discussion of Jew-gentile commensality, concluding that table fellowship between them was forbidden to first-century Jews (chapter 4). This leads Esler to a reconstruction of the events of Galatians 2 in Jerusalem and Antioch (chapter 5) which stresses the differences of view between Paul and the Jerusalem authorities, a conclusion justified by reference to the honour codes of Mediterranean culture.

In dealing with the theological matters of the central chapters of the letter, Esler argues a new thesis: that Paul's language of righteousness is not forensic or ethical but 'the language of privileged identity'. The point of Paul's rhetoric in Galatians was to redefine righteousness in terms of Christ and the saving significance of this death—thereby severing it from the judaisers' identification of righteousness with nomistic practices. Esler sides with Sanders in suggesting that Paul's arguments from Scripture and against the law were principally grounded in his experience of Christ. In so doing Esler resists arguments that Paul had some pervasive theological rationale, whether in the form of J.D.G. Dunn's suggestion that Paul's critique of 'works of law' was of these as nationalistic 'boundary markers', or N.T. Wright's notion that Christ was for Paul the 'climax of the covenant'.

In chapter 6 Esler elucidates the underlying motivation for the inclusion of an ethical 'section' in Galatians 5 and 6, using anthropological theories that attenuated liminality after social-status changes can precipitate a need for identity consolidation. Ancient concerns for family honour and dishonour are used to explain Paul's use of fictive kingship language as Paul uses stereotyping of outgroups and ethical norms to stabilise the group identity of his converts.

Both for those convinced of the potential and for those convinced of the limitations of the application of social scientific models to NT study, this is an important book with which to grapple.

II. Method and Models

The cluster of social models that Esler introduces have their starting point in the work of the social psychologist Henri Tajfel. Tajfel and others used empirical work to establish patterns of (1) social identity

development and (2) intergroup comparison and conflict. Social identity is the way individuals locate and evaluate themselves in relation to social groups. It involves cognitive, evaluative and emotional dimensions. Intergroup comparison and conflict involves mechanisms of social mobility (where an individual or subgroup exits or changes groups), social change (where a subgroup redefines or relocates itself in relation to a dominant group) and stereotyping.

With an eye to the question of the commensuration of these social models, Esler points out the strong group-orientation of ancient societies. While he admits that detailed inspection would modify the simplistic polarisation of ‘individualised modern West’ versus ‘group-orientated first century Mediterranean’, he argues that this basic pattern provides a *prima facie* argument for the applicability of group-orientated models to NT texts. To strengthen this case, he also makes an argument of the group orientation of Galatians, noting the pervasive use of collective language and the lack of reference to individuals (except perhaps at 5:10).

Despite Esler’s claims, however, the more obvious explanation of this ‘group’ language in Galatians is the genre of the letter. It was written to the churches of Galatia—and as such it is unusual in the Pauline corpus as a ‘circular’ or general letter. In the lengthy discussion among rhetorical critics of whether the letter is judicial or deliberative rhetoric (Esler is sceptical, but thinks that deliberative is roughly right), this aspect of the genre of the letter has received scant attention. Galatians is addressed to a range of different social groups (churches) each, in different proportions, containing subgroups with varying attitudes to both Paul and his ‘opponents’ in Galatia. Some are convinced enough by the circumcisers to go through the pain of circumcision (6:12-13); others are probably resisting in Paul’s name; others may be tempted, undecided or simply uninterested. The rhetoric of a general letter addressed to such a range of groups and subgroups seems to me to be much akin to the letter posted by the warden of a student residence after there has been a bout of undergraduate water-fighting with fire hoses:

You foolish undergraduates; who has persuaded you to abandon the expectations of civilised society [cf. 3:1]. You were doing so well; who persuaded you otherwise? Its just a small group influencing the whole student body. I am confident about you that you will see sense [cf. Gal 5.7-10].

All this is the language of the general letter—different forms of address function differently in relation to different groups—the same

words that are a rebuke to one are a warning to another; an expression of confidence towards one person is language designed to marginalise another. Some of Paul's language deliberately covers up differences of perspective in order to promote group responsibility and solidarity. But it is also language that is meant to bifurcate the group in order to separate Paul's sympathisers from those who are insisting on circumcision.

These observations may strengthen the case for describing the language of the letter as stereotypical, but it also alerts us to additional dimensions of the problem of mirror-reading the 'situations' in Galatia. It should also make us cautious too about the language of 'group'. In this kind of discussion, it is easily used in several different ways with shifting referents: from individual churches many miles apart, to sub-groups within these churches, to constructs in Paul's mind with common features across the Galatian congregations.

Another important set of questions that arises from Esler's use of social psychological models is the issue of their status. Esler stresses the whole religious context within which the NT documents emerged, and thus sees them not simply as receptacles of theological ideas but as products of a particular contextualised religiosity. This raises sharply the problem of how texts that are seen in this way can speak today assuming we wish to press beyond mere exemplarism. Esler is sensitive to the accusation of reductionism and insists that social methodologies need not be used at the expense of theological analysis (pp. 176-77). He certainly wishes to de-centre theological ideas as the main bridge between the first and twenty-first centuries, and thus to emphasise Paul's religion as much as his theology.

Yet there is little doubt that at times Esler does set social function over against theological analysis. For example, in his insistence that righteousness language is not forensic (or ethical) but the language of social identity (chapter 6) and his talk of 'abstract ethics' (pejoratively) over against socially-interpreted 'norms of conduct' (p. 45), Esler is certainly using social identity interpretation as an *alternative* to theological meaning. But to identify someone as a 'charismatic' Christian, or 'catholic', or 'gay' is *both* to say something about the content of these identifications and to use language with different nuances of social identity for both insiders and outsiders.

This potential reductionism is always a particular problem in two areas: ethics (prominent in Galatians) and eschatology (much less prominent in Galatians). Both of these areas are teleologically

orientated—both are principally about the future (How should people act? What is to be expected?) rather than the past or present. Both ethics and eschatology do have a clear social function, but they also press questions of the truth of ideas that are not susceptible to verification by historical, empirical or social-scientific analysis.

The status of the social models that Esler uses must be clear: if they have a contribution to make they must be used in practice to supplement, hone or ‘fill out’ theological analysis, not as a way of providing alternative ‘explanations’. The models themselves are abstractions based on empirical data. As such they are not predictive except in the sense that they can be used as heuristic tools for comparison and contrast—interpretative grids that allow new questions to be asked and new insights to be drawn from the textual material of the NT. As such, they are best seen along the lines of ‘ideal-types’—a set of salient features of the patterns of (in this case) religious culture that invite us to provide explanations of divergence as much as evidence of ‘fit’.

Esler has undoubtedly provided us with the material for much more sophisticated approaches to social modelling by sharpening up the tools for analysis. In principle more subtle tools have greater heuristic power. But as the tools are sharpened, we begin to find ourselves in a methodological double-bind. We are not empirical researchers who can go back to the religious groups of the first century in order to ‘re-questionnaire’ our subjects. The more subtle our categories and methods become, the more difficult it is to get a handle for comparison on essentially unchanging textual source-material. Thus we are caught in this Hellerian catch-22: the need to generalise and simplify social models on the one hand presses against the desire for subtlety and sharpness on the other.

III. Food, Table Fellowship and Antioch

In chapter 4 Esler reconsiders the knotty little problem of table fellowship between Jews and gentiles in the first century. He reviews the discussions of J.D.G. Dunn, E.P. Sanders and C.C. Hill on the same question² and defends his earlier view³ that Jews and gentiles

² J.D.G. Dunn, ‘The Incident at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-18)’, *JSNT* 18 (1983) 3-57; E.P. Sanders, ‘Jewish Association with Gentiles and Galatians 2:11-14’, in R.T. Fortna and B.R. Gaventa (eds), *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honour of J. Louis Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 170-88; C.C. Hill,

did not have 'full' table-fellowship in the first century. He rejects Sanders' conclusion that the problem over table fellowship involved Jewish concern over the consequences of fraternisation. Esler insists that table-fellowship 'was perceived to be a direct breach of the Torah' (p. 116), perhaps because of the risk of idolatrous breach of the biblical commandments. This rather clear-cut view stems from Esler's concentration on parallels between Jew-gentile table fellowship and early Christian meals. He focuses rather narrowly on what might be called 'full' table fellowship or 'eucharistic' commensality: whether it would be permissible for Jews and gentiles to share the same loaf and same wine at the same table.

Part of Esler's discussion is an important clarification of the how the language of table-fellowship has been used in the debate. There is much common ground, since all sides of the discussion recognise that the clearest accounts of Jews actually sharing meals with gentiles contain some oddities in their details of mealtime arrangements (Judith with Holofernes; the translators of the LXX with Ptolemy and Joseph with Aseneth). These undoubtedly betray authorial caution about 'full' table fellowship between Jews and gentiles.

Nevertheless, I doubt that Esler's stark conclusion will prove persuasive for two reasons. First, the nature of early church meals may well have been less tightly focused on a single table, common food and common vessels than Esler advocates. The work of J. Murphy-O'Connor, B.M. Blue and P. Lampe⁴ on the archaeological and social background to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 indicate that eating at separate tables, eating different food and even eating in separate rooms might have been part of common meals in the early church. On one plausible interpretation, Romans 14 gives us an example of Jewish believers selecting from the (gentile) food provided for common meals. These two passages demonstrate important similarities and differences to the Jew-gentile examples listed above. In part, of course, much of Esler's immediate concern is to get a handle on the Antioch incident of Galatians 2:11-14. But even in

Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

³ *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS 57; Cambridge CUP 1987).

⁴ J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1983); B.W. Blue 'Acts and the House Church', in D.W.J. Gill and C. Gempf (eds), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting. Vol. II: Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/ Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994); P Lampe 'The Eucharist: Identifying with Christ on the Cross', *Interpretation* 48 (1994) 36-49.

Antioch, the precise nature of the common meals from which Peter withdrew remains unclear. He could plausibly, for example, have been accepting lodging in the houses of gentile believers but avoiding the meat and wine at their tables.

Second, I suspect that in the end the more open questions are likely to prove more productive than a narrower preoccupation with providing ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ to a tightly-defined notion of table-fellowship: What was possible in the first century in close social interaction between Jews and gentiles? Under what circumstances were particular forms of interaction possible/impossible? What are the social meanings of such interactions? It is a rather strange feature of a book dedicated to mapping out for us more subtle understandings of social relationships and cultural meanings that it fails to map out the social meanings of meal fellowship or explore the variations more expansively. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Esler’s working over the material has provided fresh perspectives and will add impetus to the discussion.

In the light of his conclusions on table fellowship, Esler provides his own interpretation of the development of Paul’s relationship with the Jerusalem apostles, making use of studies of the honour code central to most ancient societies (from B.J. Malina, J.H. Neyrey and others⁵). Because he posits a more competitive relationship between Paul and the ‘pillars’ and gives little credence to the reliability of Acts as a historical source (p. 125), the resulting reconstruction has much in common with nineteenth-century interpretation. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15 = Gal. 2:1-10) was a bitterly antagonistic affair, which left ‘the circumcision group’ in Jerusalem ‘steaming with the desire for revenge. Their honour has been besmirched’ (p. 132). This group, in turn, pressured James and through him Peter to break off table-fellowship in Antioch and demand circumcision of the gentile believers in Antioch. All this was possible, according to Esler, because Paul failed to get an oath from the Jerusalem apostles. This left available to them the option of going back on their word without loss of honour, and so Paul ‘had been misled by their unsupported promise’ (p. 138).

This reconstruction supposes that the problem in Antioch is none other than that in Jerusalem (and Galatia) replayed: all three involved

⁵ E.g., B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (rev. ed. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); J.H. Neyrey, *Paul in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

the central problem of circumcision. Thus ‘those from the circumcision’ whom Peter fears (2:12) are the ‘circumcision party’ in Jerusalem. The demand on gentiles to ‘Judaize’ (2:14) involved Peter demanding circumcision and the keeping of Torah. All this sets Esler over against the recent tendency to see the events in Antioch as part of the process of clarifying the implications of the Jerusalem Council, rather than simply a reversal of the decision reached there. Such a reconstruction is open to specific criticisms: Whatever Peter and James did, is it plausible that Barnabas had so radical a change of mind between Jerusalem and Antioch? Is it not much more likely that ‘those from the circumcision’ that Peter feared in Antioch were Jews in Antioch not Jewish believers in Jerusalem? Can the verb ‘to Judaize’ carry so much of the weight of transforming what looks like a problem over common meals into one over the whole of Torah obedience, including circumcision?

Moreover, if Peter acted so radically in Antioch, was not Paul’s account playing into the hands of his opponents in Galatia by giving them Peter as an ally? The return of Peter to the radical stance of demanding circumcision involves casting radical suspicion on the *tendenz* of Paul’s account, thereby driving too great a wedge between the events as Paul reports them and a construal of what ‘actually happened’. This depends implicitly on the assumption that in recounting the events in Antioch Paul was faced with having to make the best of the very difficult situation that a version of the Antioch story was being used against him in Galatia. But it is more plausible to think that Paul was using the Antioch incident more positively—to argue *a minore*. Paul’s thrust was that Peter’s real convictions on table-fellowship were shown by his behaviour on arriving in Antioch. When Peter changed his mind, Paul then disagreed forcefully—but *inter alia* the whole discussion in Antioch was a matter of table-fellowship, there was no question of Peter reverting to demanding circumcision.

IV. Righteousness and Social Identity

Esler’s discussion of righteousness in Galatians begins with a review of the major interpretations of the *dik-* word-group. Esler’s claim is bold: ‘there is no sign of Luther’s imputed righteousness in Galatians...nor does it have an “ethical” sense’ (p. 175). Rather Esler proposes that righteousness language is best understood as language

of privileged Jewish identity. He finds precedents for this usage in the Wisdom tradition (pp. 160-69; see esp. Ps. 36; Pr. 10-15; Sirach) and thinks it 'reasonable to propose' that this could provide 'warrant for the division of society into holy insiders and sinful outsiders' (p. 164) and that 'this context for righteousness is an available one' (p. 169). So 'Paul's aim in this letter regarding righteousness was to sever it from the competing Israelite outgroup...and to claim it for his congregations' (p. 175).

Some of Esler's examples of righteousness as identity language in Jewish texts seem unconvincing. For example, Sirach 1:21 reads: 'a furiously angry man will not be able to be regarded as *dikaïos*, for the sway of his anger will be his fall'. Of this passage Esler writes: 'no judgement is in view, simply the fact that a man like this could not be regarded as *dikaïos*' (p. 162). But this passage takes as a premise that the fall of the angry person is the result of divine disapproval, built (in a Hebrew author's view) into the moral structure of the universe. It is precisely this divine disapproval of such behaviour that governs social attitudes.

In any case, Esler's privileging of the Wisdom background, however it is read, is inherently unconvincing. Habakkuk 2:4 (quoted in Gal. 3:11) must remain a core text for the discussion of righteousness in Galatians. Whilst this is not the place to review or justify the arguments for a forensic interpretation of righteousness in Galatians, such an interpretation remains the most plausible reading of Galatians 3:11 and of righteousness language in the epistle generally. By way of example, Galatians 5:5 ('we wait for the hope of righteousness') is a difficult text for Esler's argument. It is the most eschatological remark in the whole letter and it places the consummation of righteousness in the future. Most commentators think that it refers to God's final vindication/ justification of believers on the day of judgement. Esler observes that the sense of destiny of religious groups is a component of their identity, and comments that the text implies that 'righteousness...has a future dimension' (p. 175). Within the contours of the debate in Galatia, where the identification of righteousness is disputed, Esler would leave Paul saying (merely) that the social identity of the believer is incomplete. This is an implausible rhetorical strategy against opponents who claim to be able to provide righteous status under the law. Paul might engage in such a strategy—and I think he does—if on other (theological) grounds he believes that righteousness is an ultimate (forensic) good. But he

could not plausibly do so if talk of ‘righteousness’ is *only* talk of privileged identity and not forensic (or ethical) language.

An argument that the language has a certain social function does not settle the matter of theological meaning. This is not to deny the undoubtedly important point Esler is making—that ‘righteousness’ language could function to mark out group social identity. It could distinguish an in-group from an outgroup, and its meaning and application becomes an important issue in cases of contested identity, as in the Christians churches of Galatia. Consideration of this language and the contexts of its use indicate that it is more flexible and complex than Esler allows. To choose a closely-related example, the language of ‘sinners’ in Galatians 2:15 (cf. 2:17) has strong social identity overtones (in this case negative—‘you treat gentiles as “outsiders”’). In other texts, however, such language has stronger ethical or anthropological emphasis. So in Romans 5:19, the social identity overtones of ‘sinners’ are much weaker. All kinds of words with stronger or weaker social identity connotations can be used to refer to aspects of that identity or its salient characteristics.

V. Paul and the Law

Esler’s discussion of Paul and the law makes use of Fredrik Barth’s work on boundaries in ethnic interaction and Anthony Cohen’s work on insider/outsider differences in perception of ethnic boundary markers.⁶ Barth’s work stresses the role of the individual in shaping social conceptions rather than seeing the group as the determinative generator of social meanings. Barth distinguishes between the overt, public signals of identity on the one hand and the basic value orientations essential to identity on the other. Cohen’s work suggests that overt signals on the one hand and values on the other are the predominant outsider and insider perceptions of ethnic boundaries respectively. Outsiders tend to concentrate on public signals of identity (distinctive dress, rituals, etc.), while insiders focus on the more intragroup values and orientations. Esler nicely illustrates this pattern of insider/outsider perceptions of Jews from the Letter of Aristaeus. Indeed the pattern to which Barth and Cohen’s work points coheres well with the rhetoric of much Jewish apologetic in Josephus

⁶ F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); A.P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1989).

and Philo (for example⁷), which constantly spins the web of Jewish associations, values and advantages to justify what often seemed strange behaviour to their gentile detractors.

Barth pointed out that social group interaction also involves stereotyping. Esler uses this to point up the weakness (from an anthropological perspective) of Dunn's distinction between 'law' (νόμος) and 'works of law' (ἔργα νόμου) as boundary markers (food laws, circumcision, Sabbath) of Jewish identity (pp. 182-84). It is most unlikely that first-century Jews would accept gentile stereotypical presentations of their identity in terms of such 'external' boundary markers as food laws and circumcision.

The insights from Barth and Cohen are important, but left me wanting to press Esler to theorise more deeply on how all this might help with our understanding of the situations in Antioch and Galatia. For example, it is clear that earliest Christianity grew up in a social context where Jewish identity was fundamentally and *antagonistically* contested: gentile outsider perceptions were frequently both stereotyped and derogatory. This is a more serious situation than one where perceptions are simply different. One of the major concerns for Jews in interaction with gentiles (as with any inter-ethnic interaction) was assimilation and loss of distinctive identity. Thus it seems likely that there is a rough correlation between (1) the degree of intimacy of social interactions and (2) the threat of assimilation, and a consequent correlation between (1) permissions and restrictions and (2) the intimacy of social contact. So intermarriage and common meals are often the focal points for restriction, while administrative or trading contact is unrestricted. More radical groups (like the Qumran community) place restrictions even on less intimate social contact with gentiles (CD 11-12) and such groups can be said to be measurably more 'exclusive'. In Galatia there appears to have been much determination among Jewish believers to engage in table-fellowship with gentile Christians. Consequently we are interested in a more subtle description of the kind of compromises that Jews might or could make in meal-time arrangements in order to facilitate such social interaction. We might also want to know how different Jews with different degrees of strictness would react. And more generally, it would be nice to know how mediating social groups (like the early

⁷ So, for example Philo defends circumcision as (amongst other things) the excision of pleasures (*Spec. Laws* 1.8-9). Josephus' *Against Apion* is a whole work dedicated to the correction of outsider perceptions and explaining Jewish custom and history from an insider perspective.

believers) respond in antagonised social confrontation between two dominant groups (in our case Jews and pagans).

Esler's work is also suggestive of some positive insights on 'works of law'. Since these seem to be neither 'supererogatory works' (emphasising misplaced motivation) nor principally Dunn's 'boundary markers' nor mere acts in conformity with law, how does Paul use this language? Perhaps Barth and Cohen can help us more fully here too. For Paul, the problem of 'Judaising' is not the problem of 'boundary markers' defining identity too exclusively (so Dunn). Instead, Paul perceives 'Judaising' with a Jewish insider's perspective: 'works of law' are works being done with the intent to fulfil Torah, as expressive of depth of commitment to Torah. Paul uses this insider's perspective against Peter in Antioch and against the believers adopting circumcision and the law in Galatia. But only as works expressive of commitment to Torah are 'works of law' wrong, for Paul himself avoided gentile food (1 Cor. 9:20) and circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). Paul's otherwise apparently arbitrary actions in these two cases is only explained by a perception that has abandoned the traditional Jewish perspective. From a traditional Jewish perspective, Paul is giving (unforgivably) mixed signals *vis-à-vis* law-keeping. But from his own 'insider' perspective, his is a principled concern for the proclamation of Christ. Paul's objection to 'works of law' is not merely that they are acts in conformity with the law but that they are acts which betray a depth of commitment to Torah that is inappropriate to those who should be orientating their identity around Christ. Thus, while at the level of public signals of identity, there is no formal contradiction between Torah-keeping and believing in Jesus Messiah, at the level of 'insider' value orientation, the shenanigans in Antioch and Galatia reveal fundamentally opposed value orientations: works of law or faith in Christ.

VI. Esler's Hermeneutical Proposal: Interculturalism

Esler's parting shot is his suggestion for a new hermeneutical model grounded in K. Oberg's notion of 'culture shock'.⁸ Esler calls this model 'interculturalism'. He envisages the interpreters of the biblical text as travellers to a foreign country who, on meeting the new world of the text, initially find themselves disorientated by its strangeness.

⁸ K. Oberg, 'Culture Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments', *Practical Anthropology* 7 (1960) 177-82.

By analogy with Adler's theory of adjustment to culture shock, this disintegration later gives way to reintegration, autonomy and independence (p. 236). As a consequence, interpreters not only see the text in all its strangeness but, by entering into this new cultural world, are enabled to see themselves, their native culture, and its assumptions in new ways: the interpreter becomes 'more capable of critical reflection on the values and institutions of both' (p. 9). The biblical interpreter thus becomes an 'intercultural person', travelling across the cultural divide between the first and twenty-first centuries and mediating between their respective social and religious contexts. The relationship between the first-century believers from whose religious life the text arose and the world of the Christian interpreter is that of distant kin:

although the first-century people whose voices we have striven to hear, understand and honour are somehow awkward strangers, they are, like the distant cousin who arrives on our doorstep from another country, also in some sense kin (p. 238).

I offer four comments on this model. First, Esler, as you would expect from one whose work has throw up many new insights, assigns to this process of interpretation a clear revelatory function. Just as the traveller finds a strange but instructive culture, so the biblical interpreter finds a strange but illuminating text. Second, Esler's model implies a clear socio-critical function for Scripture: in the cross-cultural journey of interpretation, the interpreter not only interprets the text but finds that the text also re-interprets the traveller and their native culture. In this encounter with the text, interpreters have to re-examine their own assumptions and are enabled to see their world in a new way. Thus Esler's model points firmly to the need to escape scholarly ventriloquism, where the only voice interpreters hear in the text is their own coming back in different tones.

Thirdly, and more problematically, Esler stresses the alienation or distance of the text from our contemporary context. This bears comparison with the (Karl) Barthian-influenced canonical critics who assert the commensuration of the human condition to which the biblical text speaks. In this latter case, the claim to relevance or applicability rests on a common cross-cultural human anthropology. By contrast, Esler proposes that the relation between the world of the interpreter and the world of the texts be grounded in social anthropology. Moreover, this is not a common but a *differentiated* social anthropology. Esler is more impressed with the differences between the cultures of first and twenty-first centuries than any

similarities. This stress on the alienation of the world of the text, its over-against-ness for the modern reader, suggests that it is hard to make it speak to the contemporary world. Such emphasis on alienation forces the obvious question: does this text address us at all? Or, to use Esler's own analogy: Why would we want to visit this (biblical) country in the first place? We need convincing reasons to visit this country, rather than any other where we have relatives, if such an alienated world is to be worth the trip. When we press this question, Esler's answer is weak. First-century believers are our 'distant cousins' who turn up on the doorstep (p. 238—note that it is now they, not we, who travel). The relatives bear the same name, but the dominant feature in the analogy remains the foreignness of the relatives to each other. The family relationship is merely nominal—their common identity is little more than a common allegiance to Christ.

Finally, despite his emphasis on social models, Esler places the interpreter at the centre of the interpretative process. It is the interpreters who are being shaped by the process of moving from one culture to another, and it is they who find themselves mediating between the new world of the text and the newly-illuminated world from which they have come. This leaves me speculating about what happens as people make repeated journeys from one world to another, as the interpreter of Scripture must. In the dialogical encounter with the text, perhaps the sense of culture shock dulls after a while. The inter-cultural person becomes a chameleon, alienated from both worlds, at home in neither, constantly adapting and losing any sense of enduring or persistent ways of being. They may become a stranger to the very people from whom they came. In theological terms, might they not be in the process of losing sight of questions of truth?

VII. Conclusion

Esler's *Galatians* is a creative and important contribution to NT scholarship in general and the study of Galatians in particular. He opens up a number of important new methodological questions by honing the tools of social scientific analysis to throw open new possibilities in the text. What is most important about this book, however, is not a set of radical new conclusions but the bringing to bear of new social-scientific studies on the NT text. Sometimes Esler has new suggestions (on 'righteousness', for example), sometimes

new arguments weighing for or against existing positions (on table-fellowship and the relation of Paul to the ‘pillars’). But pervasive in this book is the attempt to reconceive the problems by looking in a different way or applying a new insight from a piece of contemporary social theorising. This is all done with attention to the difficulties of applying such insights to historical material and in detailed engagement with the texts. Whatever view one takes of the validity of Elser’s arguments or of the plausibility of the conclusions he defends, his *Galatians* has enriched the discussion with ideas that will have impact well beyond the study of this particular Pauline letter.