It is my pleasure and privilege to send forth into the world *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition*, edited by our friends and colleagues Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs. The volume is an impressive testament to the collaborative relationship forged over the years between the Ancient History Department of Macquarie University and the Australian College of Theology, many of whose teachers are graduates of the Ancient History Department of Macquarie University and the Australian College of Theology. Seventeen scholars affiliated with these institutions provide a comprehensive, integrated, and distinctively Australian contribution to the study of the context and content of the ancient Christian gospels and the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.

The book begins with material culture and the manuscript tradition, in keeping with the genius of Macquarie University, with its focus upon documentary research, as evidenced, above all, by the acclaimed series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*. Thus, Robert McIver provides a concise and vivid survey of the archaeological discoveries most relevant for the study of the life and times of Jesus. Scott Charlesworth reports on the date, provenance, and transmission of early gospel manuscripts and offer helpful orientation to the current debate on early gospel texts. Erica Mathieson evaluates the language of the gospels in light of evidence from the inscriptions and papyri.

Three chapters survey the political, social, and religious contexts of first-century Palestine. Murray Smith examines the realities of Roman rule in Palestine from 37 B.C. to 70 A.D., analyzing the complexities of the Herodian client kingdoms and the system of direct Roman rule over the provinces. James Harrison explores two aspects of Palestinian society that are alien to most Western readers, but are critical to understanding the world of Jesus: the Greco-Roman benefaction system and the Jewish quest for holiness in the Second Temple period. Jim devotes special attention to the economically marginalized within the benefaction system as the special concern of Jesus’ ministry and highlights Jesus’ quest for an alternative understanding of purity. Mark Harding provides a masterful overview of the Jewish people from the time of Persian rule, through the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV, to the period of Roman hegemony. Especially helpful is Mark Harding’s survey of the diverse array of Jewish writings, his outline of Jewish institutions, and his sketch of Palestinian parties. Mark has condensed the five volumes of Emil Schürer’s *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* into 27 pages!

Three chapters examine the complicated history of the Jesus-tradition in early Christian literature down to the beginning of the third century. Theresa Lau analyses the formative role played by the Old Testament in the composition of each of the canonical gospels. Murray Smith charts the emergence of the fourfold gospel canon. Especially interesting are his case studies of the use of gospel materials in the Apostolic Fathers, 1 and 2 Clement. Johan Ferreira introduces students to the non-canonical gospels, providing swift, clear sketches of Jewish-Christian gospels such as the Gospel of the Hebrews,
papyrus gospels, such as Papyrus Egerton 2, and the so-called Gnostic gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Apocryphon of James.

The largest section of the book is devoted to the life and ministry of Jesus. Chris Forbes introduces students to the quest for the historical Jesus with a helpful overview of methodology, sources and criteria of authenticity. Students will be grateful for the clarity of Forbes’ account of the development of historical Jesus studies, from the Enlightenment, to the so-called “Liberal Jesus,” to the renewal of the quest after World War II. Forbes judiciously summarizes the contributions of E. P. Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, Jonathan P. Meier, and James Dunn. Other chapters on the historical Jesus discuss the substance of Jesus’ message and the implications of his actions. Stephen Voowinde seeks to understand Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God by exploring the Old Testament background, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Greg Forbes focuses upon the parables of Jesus, providing a clear, concise history of scholarship on the parables from Adolf Jülicher to Luise Schottroff. Evelyn Ashley analyses the miracles of Jesus in historical and literary perspective. Ian Smith examines the passion and resurrection narratives that form the climax of each of the canonical gospels.

The volume as a whole is impressive in its content and scope. The chapters are consistently more substantive than one finds in other textbooks for colleges, seminaries, and universities. In this volume we have a serious attempt to introduce students to the social setting, the textual tradition, the sources, and the methodology for the historical study of the gospels.

I have been a connoisseur of travel-guides since I wandered through the Yale bookstore in my first year as a college student and discovered a copy of Pausanias’ Description of Greece on the shelf next to Fodors and the Blue Guides. In the best travel guides, the description of the sites, the monuments and their surroundings, rival the experience of visiting the sites in person, by means of a literary device known as ekphrasis. There are lovely moments of ekphrasis in the new guide to the setting and content of the gospel tradition by Harding and Nobbs:

• such as McIver’s graphic account of the place and archaeology of crucifixion,
• or Mathieson’s translation of a papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus that abounds in mords and phrases significant for the gospel tradition,
• or Jim Harrison’s translation of a first-century decree from Cardamylae that perfectly illustrates the ideology and practice of reciprocity,
• or Chris Forbes’ scintillating summary of the current state of historical Jesus scholarship—“Jesus research expands with chaotic creativity” (quoting Charlesworth).

May this new travel-guide to the gospel tradition lead the next generation of serious students to undertake the arduous, but thrilling journey back to the sources of our world!