THE NEW HANDMAID: THE BIBLE AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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THE SHIFT in the modern age from philosophy to science as founda-
tional method for human endeavor has had its effects in all theolog-
ical disciplines, including biblical studies. The predominant historical-
critical paradigm that has held sway for a century is the child of the
"higher criticism" of the late 19th century, which was a response to the
new scientific enthusiasm that was sweeping that era. The belief that
scholars had developed a foolproof method for establishing the meaning
of the text in its own context was long in dying. If today that myth has
been shattered and we find ourselves somewhat less sanguine about our
ability to enter and interpret a world from thousands of years ago, still
the scientific investigative mode is proving useful, now by approaching
the texts in question with specifically social questions and models for-
mulated from social science. The present article will attempt to survey
the origins, development, and present state of this method.

HISTORICAL SKETCH: OLD TESTAMENT

To attempt a thorough historical survey of the use of the social sciences
in OT scholarship would be to encompass most of the major work of the
last century, since modern scholarship about ancient Israel has long tried
to take advantage of the possibilities. Since neither is there room for
such a survey in the present article nor is this my area of expertise, the
summary will be brief.

At the end of the last century, scholars like Julius Wellhausen (1844–
1918) and W. Robertson Smith (1846–94) were seeking to reconstruct
the social world of ancient Israel through attention to its religious
institutions and beliefs as essentially social phenomena. Robertson Smith
especially followed a theory of the significance of the social dimension
and of social pressure in ancient societies, in which the religious and
political aspects of life were intermingled. Both Wellhausen[1] and Rob-
ertson Smith[2] limited their study for the most part to the literary
evidence. James Frazer was to extend the search to the customs and

[1] *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1885).
[2] *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: A. and C. Black, 1894); reprinted as
The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions (New York: Schocken, 1972).

rituals of nonliterate, primitive societies.[3] Researchers under the influence of structural anthropologists like Claude Levi Strauss tended to ascribe to primitive psychology and ritual a common uniform structure that was recoverable.[4]

The early form-critical work of scholars like Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel was also informed by attention to the social contexts of Israel's literature. Their belief was that every literary form arose from a specific kind of social context. By and large, however, they were more interested in the literature than in its context of origin, and so their work moved off in a different direction from those of the social analyst. But by and large the origins of form criticism and social analysis are virtually the same.

Johannes Pederson's ideas about primitive psychology and the importance of honor and shame as basic polarities of social experience were forerunners of more recent anthropological theory about Mediterranean cultures. Stanley Cook challenged the prevailing assumption that "oldest is simplest" and took advantage of advances in contemporary anthropology to show the complexity of many "primitive" cultures. He was able as well to draw attention to the developmental pattern of myths and rituals, so that it could not be taken for granted that meaning ascribed to them by any given society necessarily matched whatever original meaning they may have had.[5]

Yet Mowinckel, Pederson, and others were perhaps too focused on the contrast between "primitive" and "advanced" cultures, always assuming that ancient Israel fell with broad sweep into the former category. Under the influence of sometimes uncritically gathered information and the prevailing anthropological evolutionism of their day, their conceptual framework made them prone to disregard the real cross-cultural differences and complexities that did not fit their theories. It remained for others to take into account the effect of urbanization and developing individual consciousness on monarchic Israel.

Early in this century scholars like Antonin Causse and Adolphe Lods were already attempting to develop further the insights first articulated by Max Weber, the founder of the modern sociological study of religion. Weber began with a search for non-Western societies that, like the

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[3] *Folklore in the Old Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1918); *The Golden Bough* (3rd ed.; 12 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1935).

[4] Informative surveys are H. F. Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (London: SCM, 1956) 47–59; R. R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 23–24; see also R. C. Culley, *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 186–89.

[5] J. Pederson, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University, 1926); Hahn, *Old Testament* 68–81.

Protestant European society he knew, had a religious-ethical base to their economic system. He found what he was looking for in the covenant theology that he saw as basis of the organization of tribal Israelite society and in its prophetic religion. It was here that his well-known work on "charismatic" leadership found a context in the spontaneous forms of organization and mobilization for crisis that characterized premonarchic Israel. He located the rise of prophetic challenge in the clash between the older tribal confederacy of autonomous patriarchal clans of seminomads and farmers, and encounter with the new Canaanite urban culture, with its hierarchical system of landed aristocracy.[6]

Following Weber's lead, Lods and Causse, quite contrary to the evolutionist views of earlier scholars, suggested that the prophets idealized the older autonomous tribal, nomadic way of life as the point at which Israelite religion and social organization were most integral. They represented the interests of the peasants who resisted urbanization and sought to return to the simplicity of preurban life. At the same time, the prophets were at the forefront of a newly developing ethic of personal morality that moved beyond the previous collective consciousness to something approximating an individual ethic. This notion, of course, while not following an evolutionary schema, still fitted a Christianizing view of biblical history quite nicely.[7]

More recently, names like Martin Noth and George Mendenhall have come to the fore. Noth took the model of the ancient Greek amphictyony, an association of (supposedly) 12 tribes organized around a cult shrine, as comparative model for the organization of the Israelite tribes, and thus argued for the essential historicity of the number. In times of military or social crisis, they would combine forces to execute justice or defend themselves. Gradually the tendency to delegate authority to one leader in times of crisis gave way to a permanent monarchy. Today Noth's theory has been found wanting in view of the evidence that membership in the Greek amphictyony was not always set at 12 members, that the Greek association was part of an urban culture, and that there is a lack of evidence of such a truly centralized cult shrine in premonarchic Israel as Noth posited.[8]

The rural-vs.-urban theme was refined by Mendenhall with his theory

[6] *Ancient Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1952); originally published posthumously as Vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religion-Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921). Most of this work was done in 1918–19 in the form of lectures and essays, later collated and published by his widow. Weber died in 1920.

[7] Hahn, *Old Testament* 160–69.

[8] Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1958); Wilson, *Sociological Approaches* 33–34.

of an early Israelite peasant revolt against dominant Canaanite urban culture. The theological motif of the covenant and some level of centralized cult and mutual military defense provided the basis of unity among the tribes. Mendenhall's theory was the beginning of the interpretation of early Israelite social organization that is still prevalent. It left several questions unanswered, however: notably, how judicial organization was centrally enforced and how the transition was accomplished from tribal federation to centralized urban monarchy—the very thing against which the tribes had supposedly revolted.[9]

The contemporary scholar who has thus far made the most significant contribution to study of the social organization of ancient Israel is Norman K. Gottwald. Basing his work on Mendenhall, Gottwald posits increasingly large numbers of peasant bands in revolt against the oppressive Canaanite hegemony, joined by migrants from Egypt who contributed the new exodus ideology: Yahweh frees oppressed Hebrews from slavery. The groups forming in Canaan, however, were of mixed Hebrew and Canaanite ethnicity, composed of independent egalitarian[10] extended families and kinship groupings with a combined agricultural and pastoral economic base, perhaps united into small village patterns, uniting at a higher level only in times of crisis for purposes of defense or other necessary common action. Eventually the only way to defend themselves effectively from the Philistine threat was to unite more permanently into a monarchy.[11]

In other areas of OT research, Robert R. Wilson has made major new contributions. His study of biblical genealogies has taken him into comparative research on oral lineages in present traditional cultures, with careful attention to method used with anthropological data. His conclusion: genealogies function not for historical but for religious, domestic, and political purposes, to control such things as marriage, inheritance, land, and cultic relationships. Wilson's study throws new

[9] Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962) 66–87; *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1973); see Wilson, *Sociological Approaches* 34–35.

[10] "Egalitarian" certainly not in the modern sense, in which all persons regardless of birth status are theoretically social equals. Here it is a question of patriarchal families and clans whose *male heads* consider each other social equals.

[11] Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1000 B.C.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); summaries, 389–463; Wilson, *Sociological Approaches* 35–36. But see Mendenhall's scathing review of Gottwald, "Ancient Israel's Hyphenated History," in D. N. Freedman and D. F. Graf, eds., *Palestine in Transition: The Emergence of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983); and archeological evidence for the economic self-sufficiency of the nuclear rather than extended family in this period: Wilson, *Sociological Approaches* 38–40; and Y. Shiloh, "The Four-Room House—Its Situation and Function in the Israelite City," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970) 180–90.

light on their function in the biblical narratives.[12]

Wilson's second important study is on the social function of prophecy. Again, comparative study of how prophecy functions in other societies has led Wilson to distinguish between central and peripheral prophets, whose concerns are slightly different. While central prophets, those closely connected with social and religious centers of power, are more concerned to measure and control the gradual and orderly rate of social change, peripheral prophets, those at a distance from power centers, are more likely to advocate radical change. The conflict between "true" and "false" prophets is inherently social and political, and can be the context for witchcraft accusations aimed at discrediting the opposition.[13]

A brief word—unfortunately too brief—must be said about the evolving co-operation between social analysis and archeology. Once OT archeology began moving from an exclusive focus on the reconstruction of ancient Israelite history to an attempt to understand the cultural processes at work in ancient Palestine, the tools of social analysis became necessary. This has come about largely through the influence of North American archeologists.[14]

OT scholars rightfully continue to be concerned about refining method. The approach must continue to evolve as the social sciences themselves refine their methods.[15]

The Society of Biblical Literature has had one or more groups working in these areas since 1975, when Frank S. Frick and Norman Gottwald proposed to organize a program segment on The Social World of Ancient Israel. By 1977 the focus of the group was "Theory and Method in Sociological Study of Ancient Israel," and in 1979 it featured critical reviews of *The Tribes of Yahweh.* For the SBL Centennial Program in 1980, there were two sessions with presenters from both Testaments: "Approaches to the Bible through Social Analysis: Law, Power, and Authority in the Biblical World," chaired by Bruce J. Malina, and "Is Historical Anthropology Possible? An Interdisciplinary Conversation,"

[12] *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University, 1979); *Sociological Approaches* 40–66; see Culley, *Hebrew Bible* 186–87.

[13] *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); *Sociological Approaches* 67–80; see Culley, *Hebrew Bible* 186–87.

[14] See survey of recent trends by William G. Dever, "The Impact of the 'New Archaeology' on Syro-Palestinian Archaeology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 242 (1981) 15–29.

[15] For critical appraisals see Wilson, *Sociological Approaches* 3–9, 28–29, 81–83; N. Gottwald, "Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel," in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible,* ed. M. J. Buss (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 69–81. For another critical survey, see J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978).

chaired by Robert R. Wilson. By 1982 there were two groups running concurrently at the SBL annual meetings: the Sociology of the Monarchy Seminar, convened by Frank Frick and James W. Flanagan, ran until 1986, sometimes in a joint session with the American Schools of Oriental Research; the Social Roles of Prophecy Group, chaired by Robert Wilson, until 1985. In 1988 a new consultation was begun: Sociology of the Second Temple, convened by Philip R. Davies with the theme "Reconstructing the Basis of Society in the Early Persian Period."

HISTORICAL SKETCH: NEW TESTAMENT

The grandfather of the social study of the NT in the United States is generally recognized to be Shirley Jackson Case (1872–1947), along with others like Shailer Mathews in the "Chicago School" of the first years of the University of Chicago at the turn of this century.[16] Case's "sociohistorical" method was at the same time outgrowth of modernism and response to a growing fundamentalism. What today we call "historical-critical" he called "historical-literary" method, which he saw as the investigation of questions of authorship, dating, and the assessment of original literary forms, through which criteria of authenticity could be developed. Case combined the historical-literary approach with his historical-social method, by which he subjected texts to the two criteria of "social test" and "functional significance." The social test examined their appropriateness to their environment; the criterion of functional significance proposed judgments not about which texts were earliest but which were most likely to be authentic because they met the needs of the time.[17]

W. H. Hynes's excellent study of Case's work lists nine characteristics of the socio-historical method. (1) It is historical: history is seen as the realm of human activity, and naturalism is chosen over supernaturalism. (2) It is scientific-empirical: the method is to be a strictly inductive empirical investigation. (3) It is didactic rather than normative, so that no criterion or standard from the past may be normative for the present. (4) It is social: environmental setting and the societal aspect of religion are of primary importance, so that what real people believed as a result of interaction with their own environment takes precedence over official creeds, doctrines, and institutions. (5) It sees social realities as developmental or evolutionary rather than static. (6) The social process is vitalistic, built on human freedom. (7) The method is radically functional:

[16] Especially S. J. Case, *The Evolution of Early Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1914); *The Social Origins of Christianity* (ibid., 1923); *The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church* (New York: Harper, 1933).

[17] W. J. Hynes, *Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School: The Socio-Historical Method* (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1981) 36–43.

all historical-social realities are to be judged for authenticity on the criterion of whether or not they met the particular social needs of the time. (8) The method is genetic: rather than merely attending to isolated phenomena, it seeks out the complex networking of causal phenomena and relationships. (9) It is characterized by belief in human activism: the continuance of history, society, religion, and culture is a human responsibility.[18]

Definite similarities are to be seen between Case's method and German rationalism, the History of Religions school, Troeltsch, Harnack, and the American pragmatists, but no definite influences can be traced, even though John Dewey was on the faculty of the University of Chicago at the same time. But these trends were in the intellectual environment of the day, and the University of Chicago was already beginning to exemplify them in Case's early years there (beginning in 1908). Though Case never abandoned a personal belief in the unique "essence" of Christianity, he was a prime mover in drawing attention to the necessity of looking to social factors in the history of religious movements. Though it could be said that everything he did is simply within the realm of "higher criticism," the great strength of his work is its insistence on a consistently functional approach to the social aspects of religion. Its greatest weakness, as with most analytical methods, is its lack of self-critique and rigorous testing of its own theoretical assumptions.[19] Case was, of course, naive about the ability of 20th-century historians to understand an ancient social world, but no more so than other scholars of his day, and many of ours.

In the years that followed there was some interest from time to time in the social context and interaction of the people who produced the biblical texts, but among American biblical scholars that interest was largely submerged under the deluge of neo-orthodoxy. Interest in social questions was alive especially among Jewish scholars like Salo Baron[20] and E. E. Urbach,[21] and among a few European historians and NT scholars like A. H. M. Jones,[22] E. A. Judge,[23] Adolf Deissmann,[24] and

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[18] Ibid. 79–86.

[19] Ibid. 88–89, 99, 118–25, 128.

[20] *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (2 vols., New York: Columbia University, 1937; 2nd ed., 8 vols., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1952).

[21] "The Laws regarding Slavery as a Source for Social History of the Period of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and Talmud," *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies, London,* ed. J. G. Weiss, 1 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1964) 1–95.

[22] "Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?" *Journal of*

Frederick C. Grant, whose *The Economic Background of the Gospels,* published in 1926,[25] remained the standard work on first-century Palestinian economics for nearly 50 years.[26] The publication of Martin Hengel's monumental study[27] and of Gerd Theissen's series of articles on the social construction of early Christianity, written in 1974–75,[28] and his *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums*[29] parallel chronologically the beginnings of renewed interest in social analysis on the part of American NT scholars.

Since the early 70s there has been a steady stream of American publications in social description and analysis of the biblical world, so that they are now too many to name. Among the first and most influential, however, were John Gager's *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*[30] and Abraham J. Malherbe's *Social Aspects of Early Christianity.*[31] Taken together, they reflect the diversity of approach which continues to characterize the method. In an important essay written during the same period, Jonathan Z. Smith outlines four ways in which the subject may be approached: description of social facts, or realia; social history; social organization; and social world as a comprehensive world of meaning.[32] It is only in the last of these approaches that models from the social sciences can be effectively used. Malherbe's book is a good study of social facts, history, and organization; it discusses

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Theological Studies n.s. 10 (1959) 280–97; reprinted as *Were Ancient Heresies Disguised Social Movements?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

[23] *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale, 1958).

[24] *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1908); ET *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910).

[25] London: Oxford University; reprint, 1973.

[26] See R. Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1979–80) 164–79 [164–65].

[27] *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter besonderen Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2 Jh.s v. Chr.* (2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1973); ET *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

[28] Collected and translated by J. H. Schütz as *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[29] Munich: Kaiser, 1977; ET *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), and *The First Followers of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1978).

[30] Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

[31] Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1977; 2nd ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

[32] "The Social Description of Early Christianity," *Religious Studies Review* 1 (1975) 19–25.

methods of social analysis and applies them to topics of the relationship of social status and literary culture and the social problems of house churches. Gager does some social description of Christianity in its religious, political, and social environment, but also attempts to interpret two phenomena of the early Church—millenarianism and the delay of the eschaton—through the perspective of sociological observation and theory: the sociological study of other millenarian cults and the theory of cognitive dissonance.

In the same years social analysis was beginning to be represented in the scholarly organizations. In 1973 the first organizational meeting was held for a joint American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature group to be titled The Social Description of Early Christianity, under the leadership of Leander E. Keck and Wayne A. Meeks. In 1976 the topic for discussion was Jews and Christians in Antioch, the results of which were published in 1978 in a volume featuring social description and translations of key texts.[33] From 1978 the group continued under the leadership of Leander Keck and Carolyn Osiek, to be temporarily disbanded after the 1980 program, which featured papyrologist E. A. Judge from Macquarrie University in Australia. The special SBL Centennial Program the same year contained a meeting on Approaches to the Bible through Social Analysis, chaired by John Gager, with presentations on urban social relations by John Stambaugh, Reuven Kimelman, and Wayne Meeks, and on Education and Social Change in the Papyri by E. A. Judge.

The SBL group was reconstituted in 1983 under the leadership of Dennis E. Smith and L. Michael White with the title Social History of Early Christianity, changed in 1988 to The Social History of Formative Judaism and Christianity. Since 1983 this group has featured at the annual SBL meetings such themes as social networks, social context of literature, retrospectives on the work of Harnack and that of Ramsay MacMullen (the latter with response from MacMullen), archeology and social data, the social setting of Gnosticism, a dialogue with sociologist Rodney Stark, the social interaction of Jews and Gentiles, women's roles and perceptions, and family and social life in ancient religions.

Illustrative of the varying directions in which the method is moving is the fact that in 1983, the same year as the reconvening of the Social History of Early Christianity group, a second SBL group was formed under the title Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation, convened by Robert Jewett. This group has continued under the leadership of Bruce J. Malina, and, since 1988, of Malina and John Pilch. Its focus,

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[33] W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1978).

rather than social history or social description, is the application of social-science models to the historical and literary data.

In 1981 a task force entitled The Social Sciences and New Testament Exegesis was convened by Bruce Malina at the Catholic Biblical Association meeting. The CBA group has continued to meet annually. In 1986 the Social Facets Seminar of Westar Institute, chaired by John H. Elliott, was formed, and it continues to work on several projects, notably a book on Luke-Acts in social-science perspective and a series of "bookshelves," introductory guides for upper-level teachers and students to aspects of the social world of the Bible.

METHODS AND MODELS IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDY

As indicated above, two different directions have grown out of the work of recent years: social description and social-science method, neither completely separated from the other, but yet distinct from one another.

Good examples of social description include Judge's *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*; Malherbe's *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*; Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society*[34]; David L. Balch, *Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code of 1 Peter*[35]; and John E. Stambaugh and David Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*.[36] Some who are not hopeful that the application of social-science method will produce lasting results think that social description will ultimately prove most helpful.[37] That may be the case, but the time is not yet ripe for a definitive judgment.

Other writers have attempted a combination of social description and use of the social sciences. Examples would include, with varying degrees of emphasis on one or the other, Theissen's *Social Setting of Pauline*

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[34] New York: Harper and Row, 1977. Bibliography in this article is limited to published books and a few major articles. Many authors noted also have published articles, unpublished papers, and works in progress. No attempt is made to be exhaustive.

[35] Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1981.

[36] Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986. This article is confined to work on biblical texts and periods. There is also a growing literature of social description of the early Church. Among contributions are L. W. Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations* (Lewiston, N.Y./Queenston, Ont.: Edwin Mellen, 1980); M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); C. Osiek, *Rich and Poor in the Shepherd of Hermas: An Exegetical-Social Investigation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1983).

[37] E.g., D. J. Harrington, "Sociological Concepts and the Early Church: A Decade of Research," *TS* 41 (1980) 181–90.

Christianity, Bengt Holmberg,[38] John H. Elliott,[39] Wayne Meeks,[40] Adela Yarbro Collins,[41] and Douglas E. Oakman.[42]

While these kinds of judgments are sometimes difficult to call, it does seem that another distinction can be made, i.e. of those writers who are primarily concerned with the application of social-science models. Among these would be included Gerd Theissen,[43] Howard C. Kee,[44] Norman R. Peterson,[45] Bruce Malina,[46] and Jerome C. Neyrey.[47] Roughly speaking, it can be said that the first group, whose interest lies more in social description, work at a lower level of abstraction, focusing more on particularity and the interrelationship of social facts, letting the models arise from the ancient texts themselves. The third group, on the other hand, work at a higher level of abstraction (the terms "higher" and "lower" here do not imply value judgments), focusing more on the application of cross-cultural models formulated by social scientists. The second group combine both approaches by working predominantly with

[38] *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

[39] *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter: Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

[40] "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972) 44–72; *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983).

[41] *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

[42] *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston, N.Y./Queenston, Ont.: Edwin Mellen, 1986).

[43] In *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* and *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (London: T. Clark, 1983). While the former has been acclaimed as a pioneer in sociological exegesis, Theissen has openly derived the inspiration for his three methods—constructive, analytical, and comparative—from Dibelius' and Bultmann's early form-critical method, showing once again the common origins of the two approaches. See *Social Setting* 177 and 195 n. 4; Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 5.

[44] *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983).

[45] *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) chaps. 2–3.

[46] *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), written on a popular level for classroom use, but helpful well beyond its intended audience; *The Gospel of John in Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1985); *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

[47] *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); also B. Malina and J. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, Cal.: Polebridge, 1988).

the social data generated by the texts but with some use of social-science models and typology.

Those who have done the most with social-science models have, of course, found some models more helpful than others. Both sociology and cultural or social anthropology, with its stronger emphasis on cross-cultural models, are drawn upon. Among social scientists whose work has been especially helpful are Max Weber for Gager and Holmberg; Ernst Troeltsch for Theissen; Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann for several[48]; Victor Turner[49]; T. F. Carney for Malina[50]; and Mary Douglas for Malina and Neyrey.[51]

In addition, social-science studies of contemporary Mediterranean cultures[52] are helpful for comparative use, on two (not universally accepted) assumptions: (1) that there are common structural similarities across the broad range of that culture; (2) that there is some basis of continuity in the specified geographical area between modern and ancient cultures. It takes no more than sharp observation of contemporary Mediterranean life in its more traditional and less technologized aspects, combined with careful reading of certain ancient texts, to ascertain that today's Mediterranean cultures have more in common with ancient ones in the same area than they do with today's Northern European or North American cultures. But just how much in common is more difficult to demonstrate.

A helpful simplification and organization of the confusing array of social models is provided by Malina, who defines a model as "an abstract, simplified representation of some real world object, event, or interaction constructed for the purpose of understanding, control, or prediction ... a scheme or pattern that derives from the process of abstracting similar-

[48] *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

[49] *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

[50] *The Economies of Antiquity: Controls, Gifts and Trade* (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado, 1973); *The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity* (ibid., 1975).

[51] Especially *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973); "Cultural Bias" (Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Occasional Paper 35; London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1978), reprinted in *In the Active Voice* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) 183–253.

[52] These are J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966; repr., 1974); J. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977); D. Gilmore, ed., *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987). See the very helpful table summary in Malina and Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names* 145–51.

ities from a range of instances in order to comprehend."[53] He distinguishes three principal types of social-science models: structural-functionalist, conflict, and symbolic. Which kind of model one finds most workable probably says something about how the user thinks social reality works. Structural functionalism assumes that all the social forces interacting in a given situation work together to create balance or equilibrium, so that when one factor disrupts harmony, the others adjust to restore it. "Thus society is in equilibrium, in good balance, and the social system tends to persist over a period of time with major or minor amounts of adaptive change." Societal harmony is based on the consensus of members about values, and the ability of each element to adapt according to need.[54]

While structural functionalism assumes that change happens only to adjust to new needs, the conflict model assumes that change is a regular element of social life, producing constant levels of social constraint, so that conflict, reaction to constraint, rather than consensus or balance is the glue of social life and the cause of change.

The symbolic model begins not with social interaction but with symbolic meaning assigned to persons, things, and events. Social interaction is produced by people's response not to objective realities but to the interpretation assigned to them. The range of possible interpretations of symbols is determined by the shared social experience. These interpretations produce concepts of status, role, etc. which create social structures.[55]

An example from the NT that illustrates the three approaches might be the use of the household codes in Eph 5:21—6:9 and Col 3:18—4:1.[56] Why are they there? What purpose do they serve? The structural-functionalist model would assume some kind of destabilizing situation present in the communities behind the texts; perhaps it is persecution of some kind, or the raising of questions about the value of slavery and subordinate relationships, or an interpretation of principles such as those found in Gal 3:28 that is perceived as too radical. The codes then function to restore the stability needed to continue the balance of hierarchical relationships as they have been. They in fact instruct members of

[53] "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1982) 229–42, at 231.

[54] Ibid. 234.

[55] Ibid. 234–36.

[56] The code also occurs in incomplete form in 1 Pet 2:13—3:7, but there may be a different life-setting there. The absence of admonition to parents and children, but especially to masters, and the enigmatic reference in 3:1 to wives "winning" their husbands by submissive behavior lend themselves to the interpretation that there is a problem with Christian slaves and wives of pagan masters and husbands; see Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*.

Christian households how to participate in harmonious Christian life through their participation in the ordered patriarchal household.[57]

The conflict model would see the household codes as part of a great struggle going on between the communities that produced them and other Christians who advocate an entirely different way of living: one that does not adhere to traditional ideas about subordinate relationships, and which for these and other reasons must be rejected as dangerous to Christian life. Thus the codes would be part of the wider strategy of the authors to reinforce reliable teaching, including traditional familial roles, in the face of false teaching that threatens to disrupt the social order and thus lay constraints on the exigencies of the gospel.[58]

The symbolic model would focus more on the meaning assigned to various roles within the community and to the very idea of distinct roles and status. Just as in Colossians and Ephesians it is no longer that the Church as local community is the body of Christ (as in 1 Cor 12:12–27; Rom 12:4–8) but Christ who is assigned a role as head vis-à-vis his body the Church, so all have an appointed role to fill, and the household codes are one way of assigning meaning to those roles. This is most obvious in Eph 5:22–33, where the significance of the roles is especially charged by analogy to those of Christ and the Church.

Many models are available from the social sciences. No one model has yet been devised that covers all aspects of social life in a culture. One of the most comprehensive models being tried by some NT social analysts is Mary Douglas' group-grid construction.[59] While not sufficiently nuanced to account for all variations, it is a helpful tool for placing cultures and subcultures in relation to one another, and for illustrating in teaching situations the differences between the culture of "biblical" times (not by any means monolithic) and contemporary Western society.

Social analysis occurs in the interaction between the general and the particular: between those characteristics that we find in common across cultures and centuries, and those which are particular to a culture. A good social-science model should have at least the following six characteristics. (1) It should be sufficiently cross-cultural to allow for some comparative interaction between interpreter and interpreted. (2) It should be formulated at a sufficient level of abstraction so that the surfacing of similarities can happen. (3) It should be able to fit within a

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[57] Church-order texts like 1 Tim 3:1–15 and 5:1–2 quite consciously expand the analogy to the extended household of the *ekklēsia*; see esp. 3:15.

[58] Compare the insistence on the domestic role for young widows in 1 Tim 5:14–15 and the concern about false teachers who, among other things, give subversive ideas to uneducated women (2 Tim 3:6–7).

[59] Malina, *Christian Origins*; Neyrey, *Ideology of Revolt.*

larger cultural framework for broader interpretation. (4) It should conform as closely as possible to what we already know with the best critical tools about the world that produced the text. (5) The meaning generated may be irrelevant yet comprehensible to a modern Westerner, i.e. make clear both similarities and differences. (6) The way of using the model should be acceptable to social scientists, though they may disagree with the results.[60]

SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Many contemporary political theologies place great weight on a sympathetic reconstruction of ancient Israelite and Christian origins. Here is a potential field for collaboration between political theologians and social analysts. Marxist or "materialist"[61] interpretation starts with the assumption that human social life and history are formed not primarily by belief and ideology but by economic and social forces, out of which peoples generate ideas and beliefs.[62] Texts represent the linguistic component of that process and are the product of class struggle, whether from the voices of the oppressed or, more usually, from those in power with control of the means of production. In the Bible it is especially the voices of the exodus, prophetic, and Jesus traditions in their original context that speak the experience of the oppressed and the liberating power of God to free them.[63] To the extent that a social analysis of the world of the text can support this framework, the two interpretive systems can be mutually beneficial. Feminist biblical hermeneutics, too, with its starting point of critique of gender oppression in an androcentric, patriarchal society, finds support in some aspects of social analysis of the biblical world.[64]

Likewise, more generalized liberation theological hermeneutics can find grounding in social analysis. An instructive attempt at such collaboration is a collection of reprinted essays edited by Norman Gottwald,

[60] Malina, "Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation" 241.

[61] The decision to translate the French word literally is of dubious wisdom, carrying as it does in English judgmental connotations apparently not present in French.

[62] See F. Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); M. Clévenot, *Materialist Approaches to the Bible* (ibid., 1985); with a more general method, C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (ibid., 1988). See Myers' informative review and critique of various socio-political readings of the Gospels (459–72).

[63] E.g., W. Schotroff and W. Stegemann, eds., *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

[64] E. S. Fiorenza, " 'You Are Not to Be Called Father': Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective," *Cross Currents* 29 (1979) 301–23; *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); C. Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel,' *Biblical Archaeologist* 41 (1978) 91–103.

containing articles by social analysts, biblical theologians, and Marxist and liberation theologians.[65] Such attempts are new and will need further development and refinement. They are troubled by two major conflicts, two ways in which collaborating interpreters are starting at opposite points of the spectrum. (1) Political theologians take as their point of departure the present class struggle, while social analysts prefer to begin with what can be read of the historical situation behind the ancient texts. (2) Political interpretation works best if the same kind of class struggle, and therefore experience of political, social, and economic oppression, can be readily available in the text, while social analysis has no vested interest in such an interpretation. To take an example, there is something of a consensus nowadays among social analysts that the social status of many early Christians, including some original followers of Jesus, was not one of economic deprivation but of modest means. While some were no doubt poorer, a few may have been quite wealthy. This consensus does not readily lend itself to political interpretation, which would prefer a more homogeneous underclass.

On the other hand, political theologians have in common with social analysts, at least with those of a more social-science bent, that both begin with a consciously adopted model and set of assumptions, albeit usually different ones; both bring an interpretive ideology to be tested on the text. The future of collaboration may be promising. At present the alliance is an uneasy one.

EVALUATION[66]

Several disadvantages and objections to the method are often singled out.[67] The most obvious is the historical distance from the subjects, so that there is no possibility of live observation, while the original focus of sociology was to observe living cultures. Historical anthropology, however, faces the same difficulty.

A second disadvantage is the inadequacy or uncertainty about the

[65] *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (rev. ed.; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983). Both articles in the previous note are reprinted here, as well as Malina, "Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," and Gottwald, "Sociological Method."

[66] Summary and evaluative articles and books not yet referred to include T. Best, "The Sociological Study of the New Testament: Promise and Peril of a New Discipline," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983) 181–94; C. Osiek, *What Are They Saying about the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (New York/Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1984); R. Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1979–80) 164–79; D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

[67] See Harrington, "Sociological Concepts" 182–83; Theissen, *Social Setting* 175–76; Scroggs, "Sociological Interpretation" 165–66; Malina, "Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation" 237–38.

sampling. What amount of ancient Israelite or early Christian life is reflected in the texts that have survived? Probably very little, and what has survived, we can almost say with certainty, is biased. Indeed, that is probably exactly *why* it has survived.

Another drawback is that the biblical and related literary texts were never meant by their authors to yield the kinds of information for which the modern reader is looking. Religious documents are not meant to yield social information. They are in large part faith documents written for the purpose of narrating or witnessing to that faith. Even in the case of historical narratives, social analysis itself is revealing that the function and purpose is sometimes quite different than it may appear on the surface. Again this raises the serious question whether we have a sufficiently accurate base of information upon which to base broad judgments.

Another objection questions the validity of using models composed by modern people on ancient cultures, or even the validity of using social models at all in a comparative way. A variation on this objection is the questionable validity of transferring and inferring from data in contemporary and non-Western cultures to ancient Mediterranean cultures.

Then there is the accusation of reductionism and determinism. This is fundamentally a fear of the social sciences themselves and the questioning of their ability to form interpretations about human life. This is, of course, more an epistemological than a methodological question. Does social-science analysis reduce all human culture to the material and economic? Does it function to reinforce a deterministic interpretation of the dynamic of religious faith? To the extent that the inherent limitations and cultural biases of any theological or philosophical method are recognized, this problem disappears. Any interpretive paradigm runs the risk of being reductionist. It is simply a question, to what aspect of reality (e.g., economics, social forces, ideas, or beliefs) will one try mistakenly to reduce the complexity of human reality? Social analysis has been resisted and feared in some places because of its perceived association with Marxist analysis. As indicated above, I am not sure that this association is as close as some have believed. Social analysis belongs to the historical-critical school to the extent that its aim is to be as objective as possible, while at the same time being mindful of the impossibility of really doing so.

On the other hand, there is the danger of trying to be *too* objective— which can create too much of a gap between us and the text. Modern interpretive theories stress the interaction between text and interpreter, so that it is not only text but interpreter as well that is being interpreted. A well-thought-out sociology of knowledge must accompany the interpretive enterprise, so that social analysis does not become the new "objec-

tive," foolproof method.

But social analysis also makes important contributions to the interpretive venture. (1) It provides another link between religion and the social sciences, to help avoid the mutual isolation in which academic fields sometimes live. (2) It furnishes means for making integrative linkages among the various aspects of life in the biblical world. While historical and literary criticism from their respective starting points can focus too narrowly on the literary product, and biblical theology on ideas and beliefs, social analysis can be an aid to broadening the view of ancient life in its material and social aspects as well.

CHALLENGES

Modern biblical social analysis is still in its early stages. There is much yet to do. One eventual need is for some standardization of criteria and methods, which at present tend to be very eclectic. We are still at the "adopt a sociologist" stage, where everyone takes the social-science model of choice, which may or may not be compatible with other models and other interpretations. It is too early for such standardization to happen, but it is a long-range need. It will probably not happen until biblical scholars are sufficiently familiar with the methods to be able to generate their own social-science models without relying on those of sociologists and anthropologists who work with very different subjects. This point is as yet nowhere in sight.

As has already been noted, there is a tension among adherents of the social-analysis method between those who prefer less abstract, more concrete social analysis and those who wish to work with a greater degree of abstraction. It is important that those on both sides of the tension keep talking to each other, so that the social describers do not get so immersed in the data that they lose the wider picture, and the abstracters do not get so fascinated with their models that the data no longer matter but are forced into the mold of the model.[68]

Finally, comparative cultural analysis occurs at the juncture between differences and similarities. The tendency of social analysts is sometimes to stress the differences to the detriment of the similarities when comparing an ancient culture to our own. Social scientists are engaged in their own particular kind of deconstruction of accepted interpretations. This is well and good for shock value; we need to realize how utterly different the biblical world was from our own. But the analysis cannot stop there. If it does, it is vulnerable to the same criticisms leveled at the historical-critical method. Unlike literary and liberation methods, it is not always clear how social analysis contains within itself the means to

[68] See the perceptive recommendations of Best, "Sociological Study" 190–93.

bridge the gap between ancient and contemporary experience.

Social analysis in itself is not adequate as a complete biblical hermeneutic—but then, no method is. Used rigidly and exclusively, it can isolate us from the text rather than join us to it, by stressing differences and destroying links. But used in conjunction with historical, literary, and liberation methods, it promises to yield good fruit for the harvest of biblical interpretation.

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