AN INTRODUCTION

TO EACH

TO BIBLICAL CRITICISMS

ITS OWN

AND THEIR

MEANING

APPLICATION

Revised and Expanded

STEVEN L. MCKENZIE AND
STEPHEN R. HAYNES, EDITORS

6

SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM

DALE B. MARTIN

N o title given to this chapter will please every scholar whose work is discussed within it. Some scholars are content to define themselves as social historians, seeing their own work as a continuation of traditional historical criticism of the Bible, except that they explore social aspects of biblical issues that have traditionally been analyzed from a theological point of view. Other scholars explicitly call their work "social-scientific," indicating that they self-consciously appropriate concepts and models from sociology and anthropology and attempt to explain ancient Israelite and early Christian developments by use of those models. Still others resist the labels of "sociologist" or "social historian" entirely, and prefer to characterize their work as "cultural anthropology" or "ethnography of ancient Israel or early Christianity." All these approaches will be considered in this essay as attempts to interpret early Christian literature and history through categories borrowed from the social sciences, sociology, and anthropology in particular.

Although social-scientific criticism as a subspecialty within biblical studies has a relatively brief history, beginning only about twenty years ago, it owns what may be called a long "prehistory" within historical criticism of the Bible. Indeed, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza insists, modern historical research has always had social interests: "I don't think there is a historical method without a social or sociological awareness and conceptualization. For example, historiography as a discipline has been conceptualized as one of national states and their identity, and that is a social or sociological concept."[1] In fact, the discipline of sociology in its inception owes something to nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, since Max Weber, one of the pioneers of sociology, was influenced by Rudolph Sohm's debates with Adolf von Harnack, as well as by Julius Wellhausen's analysis of the development of ancient Israel.[2] Around the turn of the century, Marxist scholarship took the lead in the social analysis of early Christianity. In 1894 Frederick Engels argued that early Christianity was a social movement of the dispossessed

with remarkable similarities to modern working-class movements, while in 1925 Karl Kautsky expanded the thesis to present an account of early Christianity from a (rather simplistic) Marxist point of view.[3] Such arguments affected even mainstream biblical scholarship of the time, as scholars such as Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf Deissmann tried to broaden the scope of traditional theological analysis to pose questions about the social significances of the New Testament.[4] Although the early Marxist account of incipient Christianity has generally been rejected by historians, including most Marxists, their interests in the social locations of early Christians and the social and political ramifications of Christian language live on in all contemporary social-scientific approaches to the New Testament.

Other movements of early twentieth-century scholarship—the history of religions school, form criticism, and the so-called Chicago School of social analysis—may also be seen as precursors to social-scientific criticism. The history of religions school includes those scholars who made connections between New Testament concepts and practices and religious elements from the surrounding (primarily Greco-Roman) environment.[5] Early form critics, notably Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, wanted to isolate sections of the New Testament text, reconstruct their *Sitz im Leben* or "setting in life," and show how those originally oral units functioned in early Christian contexts of preaching, worship, prayer, or other social activity.[6] The "Chicago School," represented mainly by Shailer Mathews and Shirley Jackson Case, also addressed social issues, such as why Christianity succeeded among Gentiles when it did not among Jews, and the social level of early Christians.[7]

Several contemporary scholars have pointed out, however, that none of these precursors of the current social-scientific approach had a direct influence on the rise of similar concerns in the 1960s and 1970s. As Wayne Meeks puts it, "The *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* [history of religions school] pursued a history of ideas and mythology, lacking any kind of sociological dimension. And the form critics, who talked about *Sitz im Leben*, did not use anything that resembles sociological method in order to define what the typical life settings were."[8] John Elliott says much the same thing about the Chicago School: "Nobody out of that school is responsible for stimulating any of us when we revived [the social-scientific approach] in the sixties and seventies. Though we can look back and see interesting insights [in the Chicago School], the approach was quickly dropped."[9] Recent social-scientific criticism of the New Testament in its multiple embodiments thus dates from the 1960s and 1970s. From a variety of perspectives, scholars began to ask social questions about the New Testament. The discussion below sketches the beginnings of that recent history by mentioning the foundational works (though not necessarily the most recent or ultimately most important) of four scholars who led the way in social-scientific methods and

the New Testament. Although the account offered here is necessarily selective and partial, it is nonetheless representative of the various ways in which New Testament scholars became interested in social-scientific criticism.

In 1967–68 John Gager was teaching an introductory course on the study of religion at Haverford College, in which he had students read the works of Clifford Geertz, Evans Pritchard, Max Weber, Peter Berger, and Edmund Leach, among others. At that time New Testament scholars generally made no use of such sociologists and anthropologists for their own work. The result of Gager's attempt to do so was the publication in 1975 of *Kingdom and Community*, in which he applied different social-scientific theories and methods to early Christian texts.[10] For example, Gager analyzes early Christianity as a "millenarian movement" that developed in ways similar to modern movements expecting an imminent end to the present world order. When the *parousia* failed to occur in the first century, early Christians experienced "cognitive dissonance," a psychological tension resulting from a discrepancy between two constructions of reality, in this case their expectation of Jesus' return and the nonoccurrence of that event. They reacted to that dissonance by renewed missionary activity, as have modern groups documented by sociologists of religion. Gager's work provoked great controversy and disagreement, a reaction that testifies to the far-reaching impact of *Kingdom and Community* on biblical studies.

In the mid-1960s John Elliott was involved in the civil rights movement, first in St. Louis and then in San Francisco. Later, through his participation in protests against the Vietnam War, his attention turned increasingly to the social and political ramifications of religious belief and action. Moreover, his political activity brought him into contact with others, such as Old Testament critic Norman Gottwald, who were pursuing ways to combine social analysis with historical study of the Bible. For Elliott, the result was an analysis of 1 Peter, *A Home for the Homeless*, the manuscript of which was completed in 1978.[11] Originally, Elliott called his study a "sociological exegesis" of 1 Peter but has since decided that the term is inappropriate since it excludes reference to anthropology, which provides important theoretical scaffolding for his claims. Elliott appropriates Bryan Wilson's typology of sects to argue that the Christians reflected in the text of 1 Peter saw themselves—or the author saw them—as "resident aliens," living in but opposed to the dominant Greco-Roman culture.[12] Recognition of the sectarian nature of the community illuminates the possible social functions of elements of the letter, such as the household code of 1 Peter 2:18–3:7. By reading 1 Peter with social-scientific concerns, Elliott suggested a possible historical reconstruction of one community of early Christianity.

Although most social-scientific criticism has taken place in North America, few scholars anywhere have been as influential in this field as

Gerd Theissen, a German. Influenced by sociological "functionalism," Theissen first analyzed the early "Jesus movement" by applying concepts derived for the most part from Max Weber and his later American disciple Talcott Parsons. Functionalism conceives of societies as something like organisms whose different elements (religious practices, belief structures, mechanisms for dealing with conflict, etc.) interact with one another to integrate different members and groups into the whole organism, diffusing conflict through repression and/or change. Conflict is often considered by functionalism a natural element in the development or evolution of a society, but it is usually seen as resolving itself within the modified but coherently "functioning" unity. In an important article first published in 1973, Theissen used the Gospel texts to reconstruct the prehistory of Palestinian Christianity, arguing that many Gospel sayings reflect a social role of the "Itinerant Radical" who, due to socioeconomic tensions and problems in first-century Palestine, abandoned normal social structures such as job and family to wander about preaching Jesus' message. Other early Christians in Palestine remained in their traditional social roles and provided support and communal structures for these "wandering charismatics." Theissen's ideas were later expanded in a book, *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, and in several essays on Paul and the Corinthian church. Although Theissen's work is repeatedly criticized, it continues to have enormous influence on all branches of social-scientific criticism of the New Testament.[13]

One of the disseminators of Theissen's work on this side of the Atlantic has been Wayne A. Meeks, who, like other pioneering practitioners of social-scientific methods, became interested in them through a combination of pedagogical and research concerns. Meeks began teaching at Indiana University in 1966. Becoming more and more disenchanted with exclusively theological categories for teaching New Testament studies to undergraduates, he searched other disciplines for (in his words) "some sense of reality" not provided by a traditional history-of-religions approach. Unimpressed by most psychological models and many sociological ones, Meeks eventually settled on what may be identified as a moderate Weberian functionalism, although his work also shows strong influences from the "sociology of knowledge" theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann and from the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz. Meeks's most important work to date is *The First Urban Christians*, an analysis of Pauline Christianity using various social-scientific models and typologies. But the early piece that launched Meeks's social-scientific voyage and influenced many other scholars was "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," an examination of Johannine Christianity using concepts of sectarianism borrowed from the sociology of knowledge.[14] According to Meeks, John's portrayal of Jesus as one rejected by his own people reflects the social rupture between the Johannine community and the synagogue:

> One of the primary functions of the book, therefore, must have been to provide a reinforcement for the community's social identity, which appears to have been largely negative. It provided a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society.[15]

In 1973 these diverse initiatives in the social analysis of the New Testament converged, at least in North America, with the establishment by the Society of Biblical Literature of a working group on "The Social World of Early Christianity," chaired by Meeks and Leander Keck. In the following years a split, reflected in the discussions of this working group, occurred among scholars interested in social analysis. At the risk of oversimplification, one may identify a break between those who are content to consider their work to be "social history" and others who more self-consciously practice a "social-scientific" method. The "social historians" (among whom one might include John Gager, Wayne Meeks, William Countryman, and Howard Kee) see themselves as using traditional historical-critical methods to explore the "social world" of early Christianity. The "social scientists" (John Elliott, Jerome Neyrey, Bruce Malina, Antoinette Wire, among others) argue, to the contrary, that the task of cross-cultural analysis necessitates a more self-conscious use of anthropological or sociological models, made explicit at the outset and tested thoroughly by application to the data mined from historical texts. The latter group has formed its own organs of dialogue and research, the most visible of which is the current Society of Biblical Literature Section on "Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation."

It would be a mistake, however, to paint a picture of two distinct groups of scholars using opposing methods. Rather, in reading the numerous publications that use the term "social" somewhere in their self-descriptions and in talking to scholars engaged in such research, one senses a spectrum of opinion about what precisely a social-scientific method should be. Much of the debate, as is already obvious from the discussion thus far, centers on the use of "models" derived from the social sciences. Malina defines "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 similarities from a range of instances in order to comprehend."[16] The problem with the term "model," however, is that it may refer to a classification system as abstract, rigid, and universalizing as Mary Douglas's "group-grid" construction, or to a conceptual construction as culturally specific, freely

used, and content-oriented as patron-client systems or societal perceptions of honor and shame.[17] Few historical critics, if any, doubt the usefulness of knowledge about ancient patron-client structures for interpretation of early Christianity. Many scholars, on the other hand, have found the "group-grid" model to be too rigid or uninteresting, if not downright incomprehensible, when applied to New Testament texts.[18] Thus the debate over method becomes complicated by different uses of the term "model," which sometimes refers to an explicit appropriation of a carefully defined research practice or taxonomy, sometimes to a flexible appropriation of social-historical categories, and sometimes simply to the presuppositions of the exegete. The disagreement really centers around what particular models are used and how they are used.

Reflecting on social-scientific criticism of the New Testament, Wayne Meeks, for example, agrees that scholars need to be clearer about their methodological presuppositions but expresses reservations about some uses of models:

Once one has a model, one is tempted to use it no longer as a pattern for sorting data or a heuristic model to look through, but as material to fill in gaps where we do not have evidence. One is tempted to reify things, not only models, but types, and treat them as real things in the world. I am not satisfied, however, that any of the models is comprehensive enough to account for all the historical material; some are too bound to a particular cultural setting, usually ours, and whether they fit the ancient setting is often very difficult to tell.[19]

John Elliott, on the other hand, has criticized scholars for not recognizing that their own presuppositions are actually "models":

I think another word for "presupposition" is "model," if by that we think of how we imagine the structure, population, activities, and dynamics of the first-century world. That is a very large, abstract model. We have to be clear to ourselves what implicit models we are using, then indicate what they are to one another so we can more adequately communicate with one another, then finally get to the critical point where we can evaluate one another's work.[20]

As Meeks's comments imply, some scholars feel that models have too often been anachronistically employed, thus imposing modern sociological categories on ancient texts. William Countryman, for example, admits that "one should pay attention to social models in the hope that they will break up one's preconceptions." But he continues with more reticence: "I don't

think models evolved to explain modern society will always explain ancient society. There is no society, in my opinion, that completely matches up with the ancient Mediterranean world, though there may be some that are more closely related than others."[21] Jerome Neyrey responds, however, that the very point of using self-conscious models is to avoid anachronism. "I take these [models] and test them. Do they apply to the first century? By and large I find that, yes, the honor and shame system described by anthropologists does apply to the ancient texts. This is not anachronistic, imposing a twentieth-century phenomenon. The same applies to patron-client models and structures."[22]

Often debate about the use of models is linked with concern over the "scientific" reliability or respectability of social approaches to the New Testament. In a recent survey, Bengt Holmberg raises the issue of the "scientific maturity" of the approach, criticizing, for example, the theory of "relative deprivation" used by John Gager on the grounds that it is too "psychological," cannot be objectively verified, and resembles "metaphysical" speculation rather than "scientific precision."[23] Indeed, some scholars sound as if they believe that the use of social-scientific models that have been "tested" in the laboratory of anthropological research can deliver them from the dangers of ethnocentrism; they seem confident that the models will enable them to see things the way ancient Mediterraneans saw them.[24] Thus John Elliott, when asked whether he views his work as "scientific," answers, "Definitely yes. That is the reason I want to clarify the models, because if I can demonstrate that one abstract conception is more useful than another, I have been able to advance research. I don't want simply to say something interesting, but to advance the whole state of research in a particular area."[25]

Such a view, however, does not characterize all the scholars who use social-scientific methods. Susan R. Garrett describes her method not as "scientific" but as "hermeneutic." She explains,

There is an insistence by some people that by formulating hypotheses and testing them one will be able to escape ethnocentric bias, and I think that is an illusion. One cannot escape it, and the very formulation of the hypothesis, of questions to apply to the data is already ethnocentrically biased. The data generated and collected is biased from the beginning, and there is simply no way out of that trap.[26]

Even John Gager, who is well known for his use of explicit models, resists the label "scientific":

I am very much a humanist. I have no idea what the term "scientific" would mean in this context. The people who talk in terms of science sometimes also talk in terms of provability or demonstrability, and I

am sufficiently a postmodern thinker that I do not believe that the notion of demonstrability or provability has any value at all in our field. It's just a red herring. If you talk to anthropologists these days, they don't put much weight on notions of demonstrability either but are more interested in aspects like the cogency, coherence, and persuasiveness of an account.[27]

As these diverse sentiments indicate, there is currently much debate over what constitutes a social-scientific method for biblical studies, and much of the debate centers around profound theoretical differences, particularly epistemological ones. Nonetheless, these various scholars share the belief that all language is ineluctably social, that religion is to be interpreted as woven into the complex fabric of social structures and symbolic matrices, and that sociology and anthropology can provide useful perspectives and methods for interpreting the function of religion in society.

Examples of Social-Scientific Criticism in Luke-Acts

Ready examples are at hand that illustrate these various social-scientific approaches in studies of Luke-Acts. Three such examples demonstrate how different scholars, with somewhat different theoretical presuppositions, use social-scientific methods for exegesis. The first is the analysis of "magic" from a cultural-anthropological perspective embodied in Susan R. Garrett's *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings*.[28] The second comes from Philip Francis Esler, who uses a concept of "legitimation" derived from the sociology of knowledge practiced by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The third example is an article by Douglas E. Oakman, that is the most explicit and rigorous in its use of a specific social-scientific model.

In *The Demise of the Devil*, Garrett does not claim to employ any explicit model. Indeed, beginning with a discussion of anthropological studies of "magic," she criticizes an older model that differentiated "magic" from "religion" or "science" and that spoke of certain cultures as evidencing a "magical world view." Scholars who adopt this model consider magic to be "instrumental and goal-oriented" in its attempts to manipulate forces through ritualistic activities that practically guarantee results. Religion, on the other hand, is understood as a relationship among beings, communication rather than manipulation, and carries with it no assurance of "automatic efficacy."[29] According to this view, the anthropologist should be able to analyze how an activity is performed and decide whether the phenomenon falls under the category "magic" or "religion."

Garrett notes that such an approach is "etic," meaning that the activity is described from the anthropologist's, rather than from the native's, point of view, using categories of description and analysis that come from outside the cultural sphere being examined. Garrett characterizes her analysis, on the other hand, as balancing etic categories with "emic" ones. Instead of attempting to decide whether an action portrayed in the New Testament is "really" magical or religious, she tries to perceive the activity from the point of view of the "native," in this case, the writer and early readers of Luke-Acts. Borrowing language from cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Garrett states her working presupposition:

> Like language, ritual acts are socially transmitted and contextually dependent. Hence, they have "meaning" only as it is attributed to them by actors and observers (enemies *and* supporters), whose various interpretations are guided by their respective social locations and by the shape of their own cultural world."[30]

This means that for Garrett's purposes, whether (for example) an action of Paul in Acts would have been considered magical or religious has little connection with what Paul actually did, but rather would have been decided by intricate social conventions of labeling and by the perceptions of the people who occupied Paul's own cultural, or subcultural, world. Garrett sees her role as something like an "interpretive ethnographer" of the "culture" of Luke-Acts, who, as a member of another culture, questions the text to ascertain "the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which . . . people actually represented themselves to themselves and one another."[31] The fruitfulness of Garrett's approach is demonstrated by her exegesis of various passages in Acts, including the problematic text of Acts 13:4–12. The crux of the problem is this: If Luke wants to contrast Christianity with magic, surely one of his goals, why does he portray Paul as "cursing" Bar Jesus—a deed that appears, at least to modern persons, just as "magical" as any action of Bar Jesus? What is the function of this conflict in Luke's narrative and worldview?

By comparing ancient Jewish and Christian works that speak of magic or cursing, Garrett demonstrates how references to magic function in Luke's overarching story as signals of the activity of Satan. Magic and religion cannot be differentiated on the basis of a phenomenological understanding of the activity itself. "In portraying Paul's curse of Bar Jesus, Luke reveals that he shared with ancient magicians . . . the presupposition that words backed up with sufficient authority could wreak terrible damage."[32] But in Luke's view, Paul's actions cannot be magic because magic is satanic, and Luke portrays Paul as *conquering* magical-satanic powers." Of course,

opponents of Christianity could easily construe the situation oppositely, seeing the healings and exorcisms of Luke-Acts as magic.

In her discussion of the Bar Jesus incident and others (including, for example, Acts 8:4–25 and 19:8–20), Garrett's interests are primarily exegetical: She is concerned with the inter- and intratextual connections in Luke-Acts and related documents. *The Demise of the Devil*, therefore, is for the most part a traditional exegetical study in the historical-critical, philological tradition. Her use of social-scientific methods consists in her adoption of an ethnographic posture. In other words, she listens to the text of Luke-Acts and other ancient documents with the ears of an ethnographer; she attempts to trace unspoken connections, assumed meanings and references, underlying but unacknowledged myths. Other social-scientific critics, on the other hand, exhibit what might be called primarily historical interests. Although they are interested in exegesis, their ultimate concern is to reconstruct structures, conflicts, and developments of early Christian communities. Their concentration on the texts of early Christianity has as its goal more to ascertain the function of a particular document within the social history of early Christian groups than to explicate literary problems internal to the documents themselves. An example of this latter approach is Philip Francis Esler's *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*.[33]

Esler begins by criticizing the view that Luke wrote his work to apply a previously developed theological position to social and political issues, i.e., that Luke's theology came first and only derivatively had social or political significance. As Esler responds, "What if Luke did not sharply differentiate the theological realm from the social and political, but saw them, in fact, as closely inter-related? What if social and political exigencies played a vital role in the formation of Luke's theology, rather than merely constituting the areas in which it was applied?"[34] Of course, one traditional interpretation maintains that Luke-Acts is directly concerned with political questions, namely, that it is an apology for Christianity directed to a non-Christian Greco-Roman audience—or, alternatively, for the Roman Empire and the dominant Greco-Roman culture directed toward Christians. Esler rejects such readings of Luke-Acts, insisting that its function is not apology but "legitimation." Luke wanted to legitimate Christianity to his contemporary fellow Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, including some Romans, who "needed strong assurance that their decision to convert and to adopt a different life-style had been the correct one."[35]

Taking his model of legitimation from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's writings, Esler defines legitimation as "a process which is carried out after a social institution has originated in the first place. In essence, legitimation is the collection of ways in which an institution is explained and justified to its members."[36] Legitimation appeals to other beliefs, assumptions,

myths, or elements of the audience's "symbolic universe," a concept that is very important for the sociology of knowledge. As Esler explains:

> A symbolic universe is a body of theoretical tradition which integrates different provinces of meaning and encompasses the institutional order in a symbolic totality. . . . Within such a universe, the members of the institution have an experience of everything in its right place and also of the various phases of their biography as ordered. . . . Over the institutional level as well, symbolic universes operate as sheltering canopies. The symbolic universe also orders history; it locates all collective acts in a cohesive unity that includes past, present and future.[37]

Having set forth his theoretical assumptions, Esler proceeds to investigate several traditional exegetical conundrums of Luke-Acts. In the last chapter Esler explores a problem that has vexed many interpreters of Luke-Acts: the stance of the author toward the Roman Empire. Surely one of Luke's purposes is to portray Christianity as politically innocuous, as a movement that should be tolerated if not welcomed by Romans. Why, then, does Luke retain aspects of the tradition that could make Christianity appear revolutionary or at least socially problematic, such as the experiences of Jesus and Paul before Roman courts, the obvious corruptness of Roman officials such as Felix and Festus, and Christianity's concern with the poor and oppressed? What precisely is Luke's position toward the Roman government, and whom does he want to influence with his depiction of it?

First, Esler argues that Luke modifies much of his inherited tradition to show that even though the new religious movement might appear politically dangerous, Jesus and his disciples were repeatedly pronounced innocent of breaking any Roman law. Furthermore, when the Christians found themselves in trouble, it was through the instigation of unbelieving Jews, whose occasional successes against the Christians were due to the weakness or self-aggrandizement of individual Roman officials, not to any problem with the system of Roman jurisprudence itself. Indeed, the Roman system often saved Christians from local, and in Luke's view, unfounded hostility.[38]

But why does Luke go out of his way to portray the Romans this way?

> There is only one answer which offers a satisfying explanation for the political theme in Luke-Acts, that among the members of Luke's community were a number of Romans serving the empire in a military or administrative capacity, and that part of Luke's task was to present Christian history in such a way as to demonstrate that faith in Jesus Christ and allegiance to Rome were not mutually inconsistent.[39]

Esler has thus come full circle in his book to return to the theme of legit-imation. He concludes,

> Luke's two volumes may be described as an exercise in the legitima-tion of a sectarian movement, as a sophisticated attempt to explain and justify Christianity to the members of his community at a time when they were exposed to social and political pressures which were making their allegiance waver. Luke represents traditions relating how the gospel was initially proclaimed by Jesus and later preached throughout the Roman East in such a way as to erect a symbolic uni-verse, a sacred canopy, beneath which the institutional order of his community is given meaning and justification.[40]

Garrett and Esler are scholars who use social-scientific approaches rather freely, eclectically appropriating sociological or anthropological perspectives when they seem heuristically useful. A different practice is exemplified by *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* edited by Jerome Neyrey. The book includes articles by several scholars who meet regularly and collaborate in their use of explicit social-scientific models and meth-ods.[41] This particular collection of essays by the "Context Group," as the scholars call themselves, includes studies of Luke-Acts centering on "honor-and shame," personality in the first century, urban social relations of the preindustrial city, sickness and healing, and patron-client relations. One feature setting this collection of essays apart from most other social approaches to the New Testament is that each of the authors begins with a clearly expressed social-scientific model and proceeds to apply that model to the text of Luke-Acts. Some of the essays are more successful than others in blending social-scientific methods with textual interpretation, but the collection nevertheless serves as a valuable resource, even if only to spur theoretical and methodological discussion among biblical scholars.

An especially interesting article in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* is that by Douglas E. Oakman, "The Countryside in Luke-Acts."[42] Oakman begins with a conflict model of social interaction, as opposed to a structural-functionalist model. (Conflict models tend to analyze social structure and change by concentrating on the way different groups within a society pursue their own interests; the approach thus emphasizes the conflicts between different worldviews and ideologies rather than accepting the func-tionalist view of society as a self-maintaining organism. The opposition between these two approaches was important in sociological theory in past years, but the clean demarcation between them has now been generally blurred.) Oakman also outlines an agrarian social stratification model to demonstrate the way land and its resources are controlled in preindustrial,

peasant economies. By carefully noting how Luke portrays the countryside and peasant activity in Luke-Acts, Oakman is able to address a concern that we already have seen dealt with in Esler's book: the political implica-tions of Luke's writings. Oakman notes that although Luke does seem concerned about the poor, his apparent solutions to social inequalities center on voluntary charity within the church, never on a questioning of the land distribution system that sustained the economic injustices of the Roman Empire. Therefore, what might initially appear to be Luke's revolu-tionary inclination against the oppressive nature of early imperial economy turns out to be politically conservative. As Oakman concludes,

> What was originally a radical social critique by Jesus and his followers of the violent and oppressive political-economic order in the country-side under the early empire becomes in Luke's conception a rather innocuous sharing-ethic ambiguous in its import for rural dwellers. The countryside is apparently idealized by Luke as a place particularly receptive to this message. . . . No dramatic social reconstruction—such as the elimination of the preindustrial city or Roman imperium—is to be expected or is necessary.[43]

Oakman's article demonstrates the interesting results that can be obtained by combining detailed social-scientific models with historical and exegetical research.

A tight consensus, it is evident, does not exist among social-scientific critics regarding epistemology or methodology. Thus it is difficult to predict what the future will bring for this much-divided subdiscipline of biblical studies. Some opine that, due to the scarcity of data and evidence, we have *already* said most of what can be said about the social history of early Christianity. But most scholars believe that new directions in scholarship will emerge more from new questions and perspectives on the part of schol-ars than from new "raw" data (if such can theoretically be said to exist). Antoinette Wire, for example, points out that feminist scholarship has long led the way in understanding that "historical research reflects its own time." So the future of social-scientific criticism "depends on our history and what the trends are in our world."[44] As Andrew Overman puts it, "In all areas of academic study, especially religion, there is a synergistic relationship between our contemporary reality and the research we do on antiquity. Our reading is nuanced and sometimes changed radically, based on changes in our contem-porary world." Of course, more historical discoveries and a better knowledge of the materials we do possess would be welcome. "A broader and more sophisticated use of the Roman world—archaeology, epigraphy, realia—needs to come about to fill out this approach," Overman concludes.[45]

Beyond the question of data, however, I would like to note a few new theoretical directions being taken in the field. First, most scholars engaged in social approaches to the New Testament claim to find sociologists less and less helpful and anthropologists and ethnographers more and more interesting.[46] Second, many scholars recognize the importance of various literary methods and are attempting in their study of the New Testament to combine insights of literary critics with those of social critics. This movement in biblical studies perhaps reflects the burgeoning of "cultural studies" in many universities.[47] Third, the studies by Esler and Oakman mentioned above share a concern to analyze the social and political ramifications of religious language, texts, and movements. Such studies may be the harbingers of a growing interest in what may loosely be called "ideological criticism." Now that scholars have some social-historical material in hand, it may be time to interrogate that evidence more carefully to ascertain what structures and operations of power are reflected in the early church's texts. How do the theological debates of the New Testament relate to ideological conflicts or struggles for power among early Christians? What are the social and political positions of various Christian groups in relation to the dominant Greco-Roman culture or to the Roman Empire? With several literary-critical circles turning to ideological issues (I have in mind various forms of poststructuralist criticism, the "New Historicism," feminist criticism, gay and lesbian theories, besides the many different embodiments of Marxist analysis), it is to be expected that biblical scholars, especially those just emerging from university graduate schools, will bring similar interests to their study of early Christianity.

Whatever the future may bring, it is clear that after a twenty-year deluge of articles and books employing social-scientific methods for the study of the Bible, the approach has now arrived at a certain maturity. Different schools of thought even within this subdiscipline of biblical studies vie for the attentions and approval of the guild as a whole. Social-scientific criticism, which only recently enjoyed the reputation of a maverick among methods, is now a staid and respectable (and predictable?) member of the neighborhood. Whether it continues to provoke controversy and interest probably depends more on the ingenuity of its practitioners than on any specific characteristic of the method itself.

Notes

1. Interview, May 23, 1991. This essay is based on a series of telephone interviews as well as published documents. Between May 22 and 27, 1991, the following people were interviewed, with transcriptions of those interviews providing the sources for many of the quotations in this essay: L. William Countryman, John H. Elliott, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, John Gager, Susan R. Garrett, Wayne A. Meeks, Jerome H. Neyrey, Andrew Overman, and Antoinette Wire. The reader should keep in mind that these

quotations are from oral interviews and therefore should not be expected to display the polished prose that characterizes the written works of the scholars quoted.

2. For the theological influences on Weber, see Gilbert A. Greggs Jr., "Priest, Prophet, and Apocalyptic: The Authoring of Religious Identity in the Period of the Restoration," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1991), 74–114; see also Peter Burke, *Sociology and History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980), 20, 24; Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator: Or, Max Weber as Storyteller," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986*, vol. 2 of *The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 23–34.

3. Frederick Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," in *Marx and Engels on Religion* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1957); Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity* (New York: International, 1925).

4. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976); Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927).

5. See Werner George Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 206–324.

6. Martin Dibelius, *The Message of Jesus Christ: The Tradition of the Early Christian Communities* (New York: Scribner's, 1939); Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).

7. Shailer Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1897); Shirley Jackson Case, *The Evolution of Early Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1914); *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1923).

8. Wayne Meeks, interview, May 22, 1991.

9. John Elliott, interview, May 24, 1991.

10. John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

11. John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

12. Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society: A Sociological Study of the Elim Tabernacle, Christian Science, and the Christadelphians* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1961).

13. Gerd Theissen, "Itinerant Radicalism: The Tradition of Jesus' Sayings from the Perspective of the Sociology of Literature," *Radical Religion* 2 (1975): 84–93, originally published in German in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973): 245–71; see also *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). The essays in the latter were written from 1973 to 1975. For a survey of critiques of Theissen's work, see Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 44–54, 119–25, 140, and the works there cited.

14. Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44–72.

15. Ibid. 70.

16. Bruce Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1982): 231.

17. The "group-grid model," articulated by Mary Douglas, plots social groups on a chart depicting four quadrants arranged around two axes, one horizontal ("group") and one

vertical ("grid"), based on the worldview of the group and the members' attitudes toward issues such as purity, ritual, the body, and boundaries. The axis called "group" gauges the pressures put on individual members to conform to the group's norms and the degree to which individuals submit to those pressures. The "grid" axis measures the degree to which the society utilizes, on the one hand, a shared system of values and beliefs or, on the other hand, whether classification systems are "privatized." See *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973; originally published in 1970), esp. 82–86.

18. For use of the group-grid model see Bruce Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986); and Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1988). For criticism, see Susan R. Garrett, review of *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology, Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 532–34; and "Sociology of Early Christianity," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 6, 88–89.

19. Wayne Meeks, interview, May 22, 1991.

20. John Elliott, interview, May 24, 1991.

21. William Countryman, interview, May 25, 1991.

22. Jerome H. Neyrey, interview, May 23, 1991.

23. Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 18, 66. The latter terms are embedded in a quotation of James Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Wiley, 1975), 154–58.

24. Almost every essay in a recent book on Luke-Acts makes such a claim: Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 64, 95, 128, 149 et passim.

25. John Elliott, interview, May 24, 1991.

26. Susan R. Garrett, interview, May 22, 1991.

27. John Gager, interview, May 27, 1991.

28. Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

29. Ibid., 29, citing several different theories in a brief section.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 35; she is quoting Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 58.

32. Ibid., 86.

33. Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

34. Ibid., 1.

35. Ibid., 16

36. Ibid., 16–17. See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967); see also Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).

37. Ibid., 18.

38. Ibid., 204–5.

39. Ibid., 210.

40. Ibid., 222.

41. See note 24.

42. Douglas E. Oakman, "The Countryside in Luke-Acts," in Neyrey, ed., *Social World of Luke-Acts*.

43. Ibid., 177.

44. Antoinette Wire, interview, May 23, 1991.

45. Andrew Overman, interview, May 23, 1991.

46. In interviews this sentiment was expressed explicitly by Wayne Meeks, Susan Garrett, and Jerome Neyrey, but a perusal of studies also gives the impression that particularly sociological (as opposed to anthropological or ethnographic) theories are on the wane among scholars of early Christianity.

47. See, for example, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

For Further Reading

Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Steven Seidman, eds. *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. An interesting anthology of different authors from anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and social history, showing how various disciplines have approached what is known in some circles as "cultural studies."

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Thinking Sociologically.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. Very readable introduction to the basic issues in traditional sociology.

Burke, Peter. *Sociology and History.* Controversies in Sociology 10. London: Allen & Unwin, 1980. Entertainingly written, brief discussion of the intersection between sociological and historical methods.

Elliott, John H., ed. *Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and Its Social World. Semeia* 35 (1986). A collection of essays primarily by New Testament scholars who use the more rigorous social-scientific approach concentrating on explicit models.

Garrett, Susan R. "Sociology of Early Christianity," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, pp. 89–99. New York: Doubleday, 1992. An in-depth introduction to social-scientific methods in New Testament studies, addressing the theoretical issues underlying differences in method.

Holmberg, Bengt. *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990. A critical survey of the field, especially useful for its attention to German and Scandinavian scholarship. This book covers many important subjects but is rather shallow in its handling of theoretical issues.

Kee, Howard C. *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach to New Testament Interpretation.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. A brief survey of the field with suggestions for further work; a prolegomenon for a future book on possible theological significances of New Testament sociology.

Osiek, Carolyn. "The New Handmaid: The Bible and the Social Sciences." *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 260–78. An excellent, brief survey of the relevant literature.