

# Sociological Approaches to the Gospel

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Since 1970 the use of the social sciences has played an increasingly prominent role in Gospel studies. Early efforts concentrated on applying specific sociological theories to biblical studies, but more recent research has drawn from a wider range of social-scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines, including anthropology, peasant studies, political science, economics and Mediterranean sociology. Assessing this movement requires tracing its evolution and identifying its relationship to the disciplines of the historical-critical method before analyzing two pioneering works illustrating its use on a Gospel text and evaluating its contributions.

1. The History and Evolution of an Interdisciplinary Approach
2. Relationship to the Historical-Critical Method
3. An Analysis of Two Pioneering Works
4. Social-Scientific Criticism in Use
5. Evaluation

## 1. The History and Evolution of an Interdisciplinary Approach.

The origins of the current interest in applying the social sciences to biblical texts cannot be defined precisely, but it is possible to place the movement in some historical perspective. During the 1920s and 1930s the Chicago School, especially in the works of S.J. Case and S. Mathews, devoted its attention to the social setting of early Christianity and the «social mind» that formed theology. But the work of Case and Mathews was informed by a philosophical idealism that largely ignored the material conditions of life reflected in the texts. Being indebted to disciplines like the sociology of religion and the history of religions, it emphasized the functional aspect of religion and religious texts. Understanding the Gospels, therefore, mainly involved learning what needs they were intended to meet.

In spite of its achievements, the Chicago School did not set the agenda for future Gospel studies largely because the middle decades of the twentieth century were consumed by the debate between R. Bultmann's existential reading of the NT and his neo-orthodox adversaries, typified by a figure like O. Cullmann, who argued for the salvation-history character of the documents. This meant that issues central to the social sciences, from the political and economic to the social, were relegated to the periphery on both sides of the discussion, while questions of human existence and salvation history occupied the center. The extent of the neglect can be gauged by scanning the twentieth-century quests for the historical Jesus. As little as they otherwise had in common, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, recounted by Schweitzer (1906,

ET 1910), Bultmann's *Jesus and the Word* (ET 1926, ET 1934), and the new quest of the historical Jesus, conducted by such post-Bultmannians as E. Fuchs, G. Bornkamm, H. Conzelmann and J. M. Robinson, shared one conviction, namely that Jesus and the Gospels were unrelated to social, political or economic questions. A reading of Cullmann's *Christ and Time* (1946, ET 1950) or *Salvation in History* (1965, ET 1967) would yield a similar result for the other side of the debate.

Occasionally minority reports were registered in the form of specific issues or projects. During the 1960s, for instance, S. G. F. Brandon published *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967) and so initiated a debate about Jesus' relationship to the Zealots (and revolutionary movements in general). O. Cullmann responded three years later with *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (1970), and the debate widened as it continued. J. H. Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (1972), essentially a recap of A. Trocme's *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (1961, ET 1973), argued that one could discern in the Lukan portrayal of Jesus' ministry both a coherent political strategy and «a messianic ethic».

During the late 1960s the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins devoted its attention to a study of imperial Rome as the background for Christianity and published its results in a collection of essays edited by S. Benko and J. J. O'Rourke, *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire As the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (1971). Such projects continued a strand of scholarship that could claim antecedents like F. C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (1926) and A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963). But such work remained a distinctly minority voice.

By 1970 the debates spawned by form criticism, redaction criticism, salvation history, existentialism and the quests were challenged from an unexpected quarter. The rise of Latin-American liberation theology placed social analysis at the heart of the theological task, a synthesis clearly found in G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1972) and developed in subsequent works by J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (1978), L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (1978) and J. L. Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (1985). The efforts of these liberation theologians to integrate discussions of Jesus and the Gospels into their work, however, exposed a deficiency. Although they had developed an adequate methodological basis for their theological reflection and its relationship to the social sciences, they were handicapped when discussing Jesus or the Gospels because they were forced to use forms of biblical scholarship essentially unrelated to their project. This created a dilemma. Either they could use biblical materials in a pre-critical way (speaking of the «Galilean crisis» in Jesus' ministry, for example) or they could try to integrate historical-critical scholarship, usually in a Bultmannian vein, into their endeavors. In either case, the results were unsatisfactory. Eventually Segundo turned his attention to the problem of Jesus and the Gospels in an attempt to rectify the shortcoming. But the emergence of Latin American theology had revealed the basic failure of biblical scholarship to incorporate social analysis into its horizon of possibilities.

In 1973 a study group sponsored jointly by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) was convened to explore «The Social World of Early Christianity.» J. Z. Smith outlined the four tasks facing the group: (1) «a description of social facts given in early Christian materials»; (2) «the achievement of a genuine social history of early Christianity»; (3) determining «the social organization of early Christianity,» especially the social forces that gave rise to its institutions; and (4) defining the social world created by the early Christians, their symbolic universe and plausibility structure (Smith). Of these four tasks the first three are essentially descriptive or reconstructive while the fourth is analytical and requires the use of models.

As its first project, the group attempted a description of the social world of early Christianity in Antioch-on-the-Orontes from its beginnings to the fourth century and published the results of its work in 1978 (W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*). As both its research agenda and initial project indicated, the pursuits of this group were essentially descriptive and data gathering in nature. Although the group did not produce another Chicago School, it did encourage a continuing discussion of issues related to the social world of the early church. Characteristic examples of the work produced by scholars following the methods of social description are: H. C. Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Socio-Historical Method* (1983) and J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (1986).

In 1980 members of the Catholic Biblical Association (CBA) formed a working group to investigate the social sciences and biblical interpretation. This group concentrated its attention on the use of crosscultural models derived from anthropology. The consistent procedure of the CBA group, and the similar SBL section that was formed in 1983, was to select anthropological models and apply them either to

NT texts or to social and cultural realities found in them. Each year the group identified a specific focus (the notion of limited good, honor and shame, or the Mediterranean personality, for instance) and used selected readings from anthropology as a lens through which to read NT texts. Characteristic of the work produced by this group are: B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (1981) and *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (1986); and J. H. Elliott, ed., *Semeia 35: Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and Its Social World* (1986).

## **2. Relationship to the Historical-Critical Method.**

It could be argued that the body of scholarship concerned with the social sciences emerged to address a task identified but neglected by early proponents of the historical-critical method. Form critics had proposed the need to place each Gospel pericope (unit of tradition) in its life setting. Although that job would appear to require the use of the social sciences, form critics did not employ them. Rather, following a history of religions approach, they tended to locate texts in the life and cult of the church (its preaching and worship) or define their use in terms of the needs of the nascent church for apologia and self-definition. Attempts to contextualize sayings or narratives in this way did not ask how the texts reflected the social and cultural or political and economic systems of the Mediterranean world.

Nor did the situation change substantially when, in the mid-1950s, form criticism yielded to redaction criticism which tried to deduce the theology of the Evangelists by observing the way in which they either worked with traditional materials or created their own. Interest in the Gospels was confined to understanding how their theology was relevant for the issues facing the Gospel writer and his community. In this procedure the search for the life setting of the oral forms behind the Gospel text was replaced by a search for the life setting of the Evangelist, and efforts to determine the nature of the communities to which the Evangelists were writing were generally conducted without reference to the social sciences or the kinds of information they could provide. Community conflict tended to be seen as a function of ideological differences. Yet, like their form-critical predecessors redaction critics were raising issues their methods were not equipped to answer. Whether seeking a life setting behind the text or of the text required forms of knowledge beyond the horizon of historical-critical inquiry.

Form criticism dominated NT studies roughly from 1920 to 1955, and redaction criticism from about 1955 to 1975. It was during the ferment of the 1970s that social-scientific criticism of the Gospels emerged to address some of the issues overlooked by both form criticism and redaction criticism as well as to open up new areas of scholarly inquiry.

## **3. An Analysis of Two Pioneering Works.**

By any account J. Gager's *Kingdom and Community* (1975) and G. Theissen's *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (ET 1978, but based on essays written as early as 1974) were two of the more important early attempts to employ sociology. Equally important for this review is the fact that they combine all four of the programmatic elements described in J. Z. Smith's working paper but in different ways and with varying emphases.

Gager's work was inspired by his discovery that the scholarly methods used to study other religions had not been applied to the study of early Christianity. Accordingly, in an effort to understand the rise of earliest Christianity, Gager drew on two works devoted to the study of millenarian cults, P. Worsley's *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1968) and K. Burridge's *New Heaven, New Earth* (1969). Burridge traces the evolution of millenarian movements through three stages: alienation (old rules); crystallization (no rules); and reintegration (new rules). Social alienation provides the environment in which «premillennial murmurings» begin, usually among the disinherited and politically marginalized. But prepolitical unrest would never crystallize into a movement without the figure of the millenarian prophet who gives voice to the voiceless and interprets their situation in a way they find compelling. This charismatic figure shapes the freefloating disgruntlement into a movement promising social and moral transformation of the world order. During this phase, which Burridge calls «no rules», the movement may develop ideal communal mores, such as abolishing the distinction between the sexes and kinship obligations. In *The Ritual Process* (1969). V. Turner described this phase as the time of liminality when all members of the group experience social unity (*communitas*). However, since such movements are inherently unstable and short lived, they eventually settle down into reformist movements after forging an uncertain truce with the corrupt world that gave them birth.

Using this theoretical framework, Gager interprets the early church as a millenarian cult that arose out of the widespread social and political of the Roman world. Jesus functioned as the prophet of the

movement around whose promises the early church formed its vision of a new heaven and new earth. The failure of the Parousia led to the inevitable adjustment and reintegration of the millennial cult into the social structure of the Roman Empire.

But prior to its reintegration the cult passed through a severe internal crisis when the expected Parousia did not occur. To interpret this critical period in the life of the early church, Gager turns to the work of L. Festinger, especially his study of a modern group that predicted the end of the world, *When a Prophet Fails* (1956). Festinger found that the group he studied was not at all disheartened by the failure of its prediction. It did, however, respond to the «cognitive dissonance» created by falsification of its prediction by renewing its efforts at proselytizing. Its renewed missionary activity, he conjectured, attempted to minimize the group's cognitive dissonance by recruiting new members. Their influx would reinforce the group's identity and sense of being right even though its prediction had failed to materialize.

Once again, Gager applies the theoretical framework to interpret the relationship between the delay of the Parousia and the beginning of the church's missionary activity. The cognitive dissonance created by Jesus' death was intensified by the delay of the expected Parousia. In response to the felt crisis, the early church initiated its missionary movement into the Roman world.

The aim and scope of Theissen's work was quite different. He focused his efforts on delineating the sociology of the early Jesus movement in Palestine whose ethos was embodied by wandering charismatics. Like their Cynic counterparts, these figures travelled as mendicants, without home or family ties or claims to protection. They were supported by a network of local sympathizers who provided them with food and shelter in exchange for protection from the coming judgment. When correlated with the Son of man statements, the sayings of the wandering charismatics reveal congruence, thereby placing the itinerant figures in the same situation as the «bearer of revelation», the risen Son of man.

The issues so prominent in the sayings of Jesus preserved by the wandering preachers (homelessness, lack of family ties, lack of possessions and lack of protection, in essence the so-called hard sayings of Jesus) indicate sources of social and political alienation in Palestine. These conditions influenced the form and ideology of the Jesus movement which was «to renew this society from within ...<sup>by</sup> experimenting with a vision of love and reconciliation». In turn the Jesus movement effected its society by compensating for aggression (e.g., the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, forgiving another seventy times seven), transferring aggression (visualized judgment, exorcisms), and internalizing or introjecting aggression (call for repentance).

The function of the Jesus movement was to relieve the pressure caused by the oppressive social and exploitative economic situation. It was a renewal movement whose volatile origins were transmuted into a socially useful purpose.

In apparent contrast to Gager, Theissen seemingly began with a social description of Palestine, sketching its economic, ecological, political and cultural conditions, before reconstructing the role of the Jesus movement and its itinerant charismatics in that environment. How did they constitute a response to the social forces at work in Palestine? What organizations were required to sustain their lifestyle? What effect did they have on the institutional structures of their world? However, when Theissen comes to evaluate the role of the Jesus movement in the violent and oppressive world of Palestine, he interprets it very much like Gager interpreted the role of a millenarian movement. The reason is rather clear. Both figures worked out of a larger shared sociological framework which emphasized the structural-functional role of renewal movements as contributors to a stable public order. Their value was assessed in terms of how they were able to reduce social tensions and thereby preserve the pre-existing social order. So, in spite of their divergent methods and scope, they reached similar conclusions.

Like all pioneering efforts, their work reveals hidden contradictions and unexamined assumptions that others would disclose and discuss, but it also proved to be fruitful for generating subsequent discussion. In this sense the works of Gager and Theissen served a useful purpose.

#### **4. Social-Scientific Criticism in Use.**

Perhaps the most effective way to evaluate approaches to the Gospels using the social sciences is to compare their results with those gained through other methods. The test case chosen for this article is the interpretation of the Markan version of the so-called cleansing of the Temple (Mk 11:15-19).

Form-critical interpretation to establish the original episode/oral pericope before it was redacted by Mark or pre-Markan redactors, and in this case some consensus exists that Mark 11:15b, 17 form such a core. Of course, detaching the pericope from Mark's narrative also detaches the event from the Markan chronology and raises questions about when it occurred in the context of Jesus' ministry. Although Mark

has framed the incident by placing it late in Jesus' ministry, V. Taylor (*The Gospel according to St. Mark*, Ed ed., 1966) believed that it occurred much earlier and reflected Jesus' «reforming zeal». To Taylor, Jesus was expressing his opposition to conducting trade in the Temple precincts. His action was «a spirited protest» against the fleecing of pilgrims by unscrupulous businessmen.

Other scholars searching for a pre-Markan meaning add Mark 11:16 to the core because they read it as an act of hope and judgment. Jesus was trying to restore the Temple to its proper role, «the house of God» it was supposed to be in the last days. If this were his intent, then Jesus resembled the sectarians at Qumran in his attitude toward the Temple; he did not repudiate the Temple but judged it defiled and in need of purification. In this case Mark 11:16 expresses Jesus' desire that no unconsecrated vessels be brought to the Temple for cultic use or even carried through the outer court of the Temple by thoughtless Jerusalemites taking a short cut through its precincts. In a variation of this position R. H. Lightfoot (*The Gospel Message of St. Mark*, 1950) argued that the cleansing was an attempt to reclaim the outer courtyard for pious Gentiles so they could pray in peace undisturbed by the clamor of commercial transactions. Jesus saw the buying and selling as infringing on the «rights and privileges» of the Gentiles. This is why the cleansing was limited to the so-called Court of the Gentiles. By avoiding the inner courts of the Temple, Jesus signalled his approval of the sacrificial system.

Redaction critics focus on the setting of the passage in Mark as well as on the additions to the original core of the pericope. Using this approach, E. Schweizer (*The Good News according to Mark*, 1970) thinks that Mark 11:16 came from the hand of a pre-Markan redactor concerned to make the incident appear like an attempt at reform. But as the Markan framing of the episode makes clear (cf. Mk 11:12-14, 20-26), the withered fig tree is a symbolic counterpart of the Temple. IN Mark's Gospel Jesus was performing a symbolic destruction of the Temple. But why? Because, argues Schweizer, it was an institution restricted exclusively to Jews, and Jesus' mission was to all peoples. So the Temple episode reflects an intimation of the Gentile mission.

Kelber (*The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and A New Time*, 1973) also finds the same message. Jesus' initial scrutiny of the Temple (Mk 11:11, the verb *periplepsamenos*) communicates disapproval, and Mark 11:16 indicates that Jesus interfered with the transport of cultic vessels. So his protest is aimed at the whole Temple system, commercial and cultic. The withered fig tree «strikes at the eschatological prestige» of the Temple. The eschatological crisis brought by Jesus takes precedence over the Temple and relativizes its value. These readings then arrive at a conclusion strikingly different from the inferences derived from form-critical readings of the text.

Yet after the differences have been noted, one notable similarity exists. Both form critics and redaction critics view the conflict as essentially religious or symbolizing the conflict between religion and commerce. This consensus is not shared by critics using the social sciences, who specify the conflict more in political and economic terms. C. Myers interprets the entry episodes (into Jerusalem and into the Temple) as launching «the second direct action campaign» of Jesus' ministry, whose purpose is to force a showdown with the Jerusalem elites. The entry into Jerusalem and the Temple can be seen as «political street theatre». The Temple cleansing refers back to the strong man parable (3:27) as the use of *skeuos* (translated «goods» in 3:37 and «vessels» in 11:16) in each passage suggests. But for Myers the Temple is primarily an economic institution, the center of ruling-class interests in Jerusalem. The money changers are simply the street-level representatives of the Temple's banking interests, and the dove sellers dispense the basic commodity used by the poor to participate in the Temple system of sacrifices and purity requirements, both of which Jesus has repudiated. By singling out these two groups, Jesus has assaulted the visible representatives of oppression «within a political economy that doubly exploited the poor.» In agreement with Myers, Belo noted the use of the verb *ekballein* (to drive out) to describe Jesus' actions. Prior to this episode it had been used to describe the expulsion of demons. Its use in this context, Belo argues, equates the monetary system of the Temple and its functionaries with the demonic.

H. Waetjen, who basically shares Myers' view, argues that Jesus intends to shut down the Temple, which is nothing less than the center of power regulating the economic, political and social life of the people. Through its demand for tithes, the Temple participated in a tributary mode of production that oppressed peasants while maintaining its own power and presage. At the same time, the Temple propagated and legitimized the dehumanizing purity/pollution system which rendered the people of the land (the '*am ha'ares*') unclean and degraded.

The differences between the social-scientific interpreters and their historical-critical counterparts are obvious, and they reflect the consequences of methodological choices as well as ideological investments. The nature of the Temple is clearly an important issue. So is the intent, character and scope of Jesus'

actions. Is he a reformer, a prophetic critic or a destroyer? Why is he perceived to be fulfilling the role assigned to him by various interpreters?

### 5. Evaluation.

The use of methods and models derived from the social sciences and their application to Jesus and the Gospels have not been without their critics. Generally speaking, this approach remains subject to the withering criticisms levelled against a «bankrupt» historical-critical method by W. Wink (*The Bible in Human Transformation*, 1973). Taking stock of the assets and liabilities of «the biblical critical paradigm,» Wink listed five deficits: (1) the method was incommensurate with the intention of the texts; (2) it reflected the «ideology of objectivism» and (3) it «fell prey» to a technologism that limited the kinds of questions asked of a text to those which its method could answer; (4) it removed itself from the community of faith for whom its results were intended and, finally, (5) it failed to change with a changing historical context so that its polemical origins became increasingly anachronistic. Wink's bill of particulars could equally well be applied to forms of social-scientific criticism. In fact the specific concerns noted below repeat them in varied ways.

Other criticisms and questions relate more specifically to the distinctive approaches used by the social sciences. The first concerns the models used. How can models created by moderns interpret an ancient culture? The danger of anachronism is always present. A related issue is transferability. How transferable--not just from the present to the past but from culture to culture--are models developed by anthropologists or sociologists? A second concerns the incommensurability of the methods and the texts. The biblical texts were not written to yield the kind of information sought by the social sciences. How can social-scientific models extract knowledge not within the purview of the biblical writer?

A third criticism concerns reductionism. Some think that the social sciences tend to reduce all theology to sociology or anthropology in disguise. Social forces either determine or cause specific theologies to arise. The accusation of reductionism was filed against N. Gottwald (*The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel*, 1979); once he had explored the sociology of Israel's religion, he had defined a sufficient cause for its emergence. Such an approach may ignore or minimize the truth claims of theological statements or religious expressions.

Finally, while objectivity may be desirable, it also distances the interpreter from the text and renders it a subject for investigation but not a Scripture that scrutinizes and searches the interpreter.

While acknowledging the validity of many of these criticisms, other considerations must also be kept in mind. While models run the risk of introducing anachronism, they also supply controls to a study. The more self-conscious scholars are about research models and methods, the more completely they can define the limits of an investigation and avoid making extravagant claims for its results or implications. The alternative is to use implicit methods and models (for all interpreters operate with some methods and models) drawn from one's current culture and unconsciously impose them on the ancient texts. This procedure effectively muzzles the ancient texts although it gives the appearance of showing their relevance because they speak to the contemporary situation. The strangeness of the Gospels as first-century documents is lost. The concern that modern methods and models may not apply to ancient texts is, therefore, somewhat misleading since every modern interpreter uses contemporary models to understand the ancient texts. The question is how self-conscious the interpreter is about the models and methods being employed.

The related question of incommensurability between texts and models does suggest the need for prudence. But candor requires the acknowledgment that all theological, ecclesial and scholarly inquiries confront the same issue. If the use of the social sciences highlights the importance of this issue for all academic study of the Gospels, it will have served an invaluable purpose.

Reductionism is indeed a danger of any form of biblical criticism, and no less so for those forms using the social sciences. But the social sciences can also be seen as restoring perspective to the development of the early church and the formation of Scripture. As G. Casalis noted, «correct ideas don't fall from the skies,» and the capacity to understand the human and social dimensions of these developments can reduce the mystification that all too often reinforces unwarranted claims and authoritarian appeals. Put in another but related perspective, the use of the social sciences can contribute to our understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. Any view of the inspiration of Scripture must respect the way God chose to give Scripture to the church, and for whatever reasons, God chose to provide Scriptures that are simultaneously ancient documents (e.g., first-century Gospels) and contemporary «Word of God.» Therefore, any path of interpreting the Scripture must pass through the ancient world to speak to the modern world. The social

sciences provide many useful tools (though not the only ones) for conducting that difficult task precisely because they can elucidate that first-century Mediterranean world.

Gaining perspective on the ancient world is not the same thing as being objective, and the social sciences can deliver objectivity no more than any other method, particularly for those who study the Gospels as documents of faith. But any method that makes one aware of the relativity of one's own culture and, therefore, of the need to use crosscultural models as part of the study of the Gospels has made a significant contribution.

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