

Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation

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It is now some thirty years since the thriving movement to explore Old and New Testaments using social-scientific insights began, even though, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, there are precedents for this going back to the nineteenth century (as Anselm Hagedorn and I demonstrate in chapter 2 of this volume). The use of social-scientific models in biblical interpretation has already attracted considerable attention.¹ My object here is not to canvass the entirety of that discussion but to take up one central aspect of it, by explaining and defending the true nature of model use. Yet my aim is not simply to clear away misconceptions concerning model use in biblical interpretation, but also—with reference to the thought of Max Weber—to mount a positive defense of this enterprise of a kind that previously has not been essayed in detail.²

The Use of Models in Social-Scientific Interpretation

Social-scientific interpretation undertaken by the overwhelming majority of its practitioners is a heuristic process. It fires the social-scientific imagination to ask new questions of data, to which only the data can provide the answers.

Models are essentially simplifications, exemplifications, and systematizations of data used for comparative processes. Those who employ them in exegesis know they are merely tools available to enable comparison. It is senseless, therefore, to ask if models are “true” or

"false," as one certainly could ask of some alleged social law. Rather, one must judge a model by whether or not it is helpful. All biblical critics using social-scientific models agree that if a model is not helpful, it should be modified or even replaced with one that is helpful.

Models are not used for deduction or induction, but in what one American philosopher has called "abduction"—the process of shuttling back and forth between model and data, identified by C. S. Peirce.³ Models of phenomena such as identity, ethnicity, religion, sect, kinship, time, honor and shame, patron and client, collective memory, and so on allow us to interrogate these issues in biblical texts in helpful and socially important ways. Without models, we still deploy concepts such as these, but this presents the danger that our use of such concepts will be influenced by unexamined prejudices and presuppositions that may (not must) reflect an ethnocentric embedding in our culture.

Models that are employed heuristically in this way cannot reasonably be tarred with the brush of social nominalism or deductivism, as some have tried to do. Nevertheless, most users of models, including the members of the Context Group, of which I am a member,⁴ do accept the existence of certain regularities in social life, even though these regularities fall far short of "social laws." The work of Max Weber can be employed in support of our position.

Max Weber on Social-Scientific Modeling

Talcott Parsons has pointed to important features in the intellectual context of Weber's methodology of the social sciences, which run counter to the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the inventor of the word "sociology." Comte had advocated "positive philosophy" or "positivism." By this he meant a science of society that could explain the past of humankind and predict its future course by using the same methods of inquiry, especially observation, experimentation, and comparison, that had proved so successful in the natural sciences. As explained in his *Course of Positivist Philosophy* (1830–42), Comte argued that we had arrived at a scientific or positive stage in the development of the human spirit where our understanding of the causation of facts of social life involved establishing their "laws," that is, the "invariable relations of succession and resemblance" that connect them.⁵ While a definition of this sort is necessary if "law" is to be used in this context, it is very difficult to find social theorists in the last one hundred years who have shared Comte's confidence in the existence of "social laws."⁶ There are

thousands of them, however, who use other aspects of scientific method in their research. Today an increasing number of *natural*, let alone *social*, scientists no longer hold to the theories of causation and "law" that underpinned Comte's views.⁷

Whereas in France Comte had developed a positivist program of "social laws," in nineteenth-century Germany there was strong adherence to the view that human knowledge fell into two radically different categories, the natural sciences and the studies of culture and behavior. Weber's whole project entailed building a bridge between these two intellectual traditions. On the one hand, he went along with German criticism of the attempt to assimilate the study of human behavior to the natural sciences. He recognized that this meant squeezing out the most distinctive aspect of the treatment of human problems, notably the use of subjective categories.⁸ This can be seen and amplified in relation to his views on Marxism.

Alan Swingewood has observed that Weber objected to Marxism because it was a form of economic determinism in which society was seen as a system dominated entirely by its mode of production and laws of development, with human beings regarded as passive objects of an historically evolving whole. Weber objected that laws of the Marxist or positivist type "eliminated the active and conscious elements of a culture transforming all ideas to the status of automatic reflexes of external, material forces." In his early methodological essays Weber sought to demonstrate that "the fundamental task of social science lies in analysing society as a structure of meaning-endowing actions centred on the human subject."⁹

On the other hand, as far as history was concerned, there was a tendency among nineteenth-century German thinkers to regard chronological sequences of human phenomena as unique and incapable of comparison with one another and associated with this was the radical denial of the relevance of generalized theoretical categories.¹⁰ But Weber attacked such a position, as Parsons noted: "His basic thesis in this connexion is that generalized theoretical categories are as essential to the proof of causal relationships in the human and cultural field as they are in the natural sciences."¹¹

Weber did not think that because human action was subjective it was unpredictable. He defined sociology as "a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects."¹² Social action depends on human subjects selecting means to realize social ends and

this purposive component separates it from natural processes. Social action is thus governed by norms relating to the means-ends continuum and this aspect allows the sociologist to undertake causal analysis.¹³

This brings us back to Weber on social generalizations:

It is customary to designate various sociological generalizations, as for example "Gresham's Law" [which states that bad money drives good money out of circulation, since those with superior currency will hoard it and the inferior currency will thus come to dominate the circulation], as scientific "laws." These are in fact typical probabilities confirmed by observation to the effect that under certain given conditions an expected course of social action will occur, which is understandable in terms of the typical motives and typical subjective intentions of the actors.¹⁴

In his footnote to this section of the Weber's text, Talcott Parsons notes:

These generalizations are, however, not methodologically equivalent to most of the laws of physics, especially of analytical mechanics. The latter do not generally formulate a concrete course of events, but rather a uniform relationship between the values of two or more variables. *Weber does not even consider the possibility of formulating laws of this latter type*, essentially because he does not develop social theory explicitly in the direction of setting up a system of inter-dependent variables but confines it to the ideal type level.¹⁵

Thus, there is no room in Weber's theory of social causation for the "invariable relations of succession and resemblance" between phenomena that characterized the views of Auguste Comte.

A sense of what Weber had in mind can be observed in his understanding of social action. By "social action" he meant human behavior to which the human agent attaches subjective meaning that takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby directed in its course.¹⁶ He considered it possible to observe certain empirical uniformities in the field of social action. That is to say:

Certain types, that is, of action which correspond to a typically appropriate subjective meaning attributable to the same actors, are found to be widespread, being frequently repeated by the

same individual or simultaneously performed by many different ones. Sociological investigation is concerned with these typical modes of action.¹⁷

Weber's theoretical focus lay in the development of "ideal types," not social laws.¹⁸ Elsewhere he defined an ideal type as follows:

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (*Gedankenbild*). In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (*Gedankenbild*) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal construct approximates to or diverges from reality. . . .¹⁹

These types are used in comparison with empirical cases, as are models, which are closely related to types.²⁰ Some writers have suggested renaming Weber's "ideal" type a "constructed" type to remove any confusing suggestion that they are "ideal" in the Platonic sense.²¹

Unfortunately, Weber never attempted to analyze the structure of a total social system, but merely fixed upon certain components of such an analysis.²² Especially notable was his classification of four types of action: (a) rational action oriented to the attainment of an absolute value (*Wertrationalität*); (b) rational goal-oriented action in which the goal and means are rationally selected (*Zweckrationalität*); (c) affectual action that is determined by the emotional impact on the actor; and (d) traditional action that is guided by custom and habit.²³

Those who do interest themselves in social actions of the sort Weber identified, but on a broader scale, locating and documenting patterns of behavior that are widespread and frequently repeated where the actors involved attribute to them the same subjective meaning, are clearly following in his footsteps. Such investigators are not appealing to the "social laws" of Auguste Comte, but, as Weber explained, to "typical probabilities confirmed by observation to the effect that under certain given conditions an expected course of social action will occur, which is understandable in terms of the typical motives and typical subjective intentions of the actors."²⁴

The long ethnographic tradition of describing discrete cultures in

the world can be related to Weber's position in that each culture tends to be characterized by a distinctive ensemble of social actions. In recent years significant steps have been taken toward isolating the key variables relevant to developing a taxonomy of cultures. In 1980 Dutch social scientist Geert Hofstede published *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, in which he proposed five such variables, the chief among them being whether cultures were "individualistic" (with ties between individuals being comparatively weak, where individual self-assertion is a key value) or "collectivistic" (with individuals being bound together into strong in-groups, where loyalty was a key value). Thus, in the individualistic United States, a wayward teenager is often (though not always—this is a probability, not a "social law") punished by being "grounded" by his or her parents, whereas in collectivistic Japan parents may punish their teenage child by temporarily locking him or her out of the family home. Hofstede's individualism/collectivism spectrum has proved immensely useful in recent research, for example, in the hands of Harry Triandis.²⁵

Bruce Malina and The New Testament World

In his important work *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, first published in 1981, Bruce Malina attempts two things. First, he seeks—at a fairly high level of abstraction that must necessarily exclude local detail—to map the "typical probabilities" of social action in the modern Mediterranean cultural zone where traditional patterns of life have not been too disrupted by modernization and Westernization. Here Malina stands squarely in Weber's footsteps. I will give two examples of these social actions.

First, in many parts of the Mediterranean people believe in the evil eye, which is a force of evil activated by envy, especially an envious stare. Children are thought to be particularly susceptible. Accordingly, a forerunner who compliments a Turkish farming couple on how beautiful their baby is will likely receive a hostile response, since they will probably (not inevitably, this is a probability, not a law) interpret the compliment as a false one, motivated by envy and damaging to their child. Second, in some parts of the region women who leave their family to run off with a young man (rather than to marry someone approved by her parents, for example, a first cousin) will shame the family to such an extent that one of her male relatives, her father or a brother most commonly, will try to kill her. Neither of these cases illustrate social laws; Comte has no place

here. It will not inevitably happen that a couple will react with anger to a remark about their child, or that a family will kill their daughter who has eloped. But in both cases there is a probability that this will happen, that here we have commonly repeated actions that are understandable "in terms of the typical motives and typical subjective intentions of the actors." These probabilities can be used predictively, as in both of the cases just mentioned. Indeed, to deny the reality or the importance of social actions such as these could, in some circumstances in the Middle East, be dangerously irresponsible. But there are still those who proceed as if these regularities did not exist. For instance, anyone having even a passing familiarity with Mediterranean culture could have foreseen that for the Bush administration to offer Turkey a hefty aid package in order to secure its consent to a U.S. attack from Turkey against Iraq in the second Gulf War would be interpreted by Turks as a slight against their honor—as if their assistance could be bought! So it turned out, and the Turkish Parliament refused the United States permission to open a front against Saddam Hussein from their country.

The second thing Malina sought to do in *The New Testament World* was to bring these social actions characteristic of the modern Mediterranean into heuristic comparison with historical data in the New Testament (and the same exercise can be undertaken in relation to Old Testament data). Here again the move is quintessentially Weberian. The whole point of Weber's formulating ideal types of social action was to allow comparison with empirical data, including that from historical sources. Thus, at one point Weber described one function of sociology as follows:

Among the various bases on which its concepts are formulated and its generalizations worked out, is an attempt to justify its important claim to be able to make a casual explanation of some historically and culturally important phenomenon.²⁶

In this spirit, Weber himself investigated the rise of capitalism in the West.²⁷

The Mediterranean anthropology utilized by Malina is only one among a wide range of social-scientific traditions from which models can be drawn for understanding biblical data. Other sources are sociology and, in my own work in the last decade, that branch of social psychology known as social-identity theory.

Critique of the Use of Social Sciences in Biblical Interpretation

Back in the 1970s much of the action in the area of social-scientific exegesis occurred in relation to the New Testament. In 1972 Wayne Meeks published a superlative article entitled "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," which sought to explain a dominant theme in the Fourth Gospel using—seemingly for the first time in biblical research—insights drawn from a sociological work that has since proved immensely helpful to numerous biblical critics: *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In 1974 Gerd Theissen published *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung*, in which he presented the early Jesus-movement as a balance between wandering charismatics and settled communities of sympathizers (with the English translation, *The First Followers of Jesus*, appearing in 1978), while in 1975 John G. Gager published his influential work, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*. From its inauguration in 1973 the Working Group on the Social World of Early Christianity of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion attracted participants such as Meeks, Leander Keck, Abraham Malherbe, and Robert Wilken. One fruit of these meetings was the publication in 1978 of a book by Meeks and Wilken entitled *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*. This book was, however, almost entirely untouched by social-scientific ideas.

Wayne Meeks and The First Urban Christians

During those exciting 1970s Meeks had been working on a monograph that he published in 1983 with the title *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. In his preface and elsewhere in the book Meeks described this as a work of "social history." In the introduction Meeks interpreted "social history" in a manner open to the use of social sciences, yet he did so in a very qualified sense:

In this study the use of theory will be suggestive, rather than generative in the manner of the experimental sciences. As Max Weber long ago pointed out, historical hypotheses do not admit of verification in the manner of scientific laws, and the controlled experiment is inevitably a misleading model for historical inquiry.²⁸

The point that Meeks detects at this place in Weber's work²⁹ is not to be found there, however. In fact, Weber was making precisely the opposite point, that the generalization in economics known as "Gresham's law" had been empirically confirmed to a high degree of accuracy. Weber accepted, however, that in many other cases of historical interpretation it was not possible to produce the degree of verification "which was feasible in this case."³⁰ For Weber, while he certainly believed in forms of social causation, did not subscribe to a belief in social laws and a little later in this text explained the status of generalizations such as "Gresham's law," as mentioned above.

Meeks continued on from the quotation immediately above as follows:

In asking about the social context and social forms of early Christianity, we are not undertaking to discover or validate laws about human behavior in general. We are seeking rather to understand a particular set of phenomena in the second half of the first century, although *understand* need not be taken in the special sense that Weber used.³¹

Numerous problems cluster around Meeks's position as expressed here and continue to beset his more recent views. First, Meeks neglected to say what he meant by "laws about human behavior," or to point to any social theorist in connection with them. Almost certainly, however, he had in mind the work of Auguste Comte. Second, it is noteworthy that Meeks did not cite a single biblical critic who had fallen prey to the temptation to try to discover or validate general laws of human behavior. Whether he thought some biblical interpreters were doing this, but he simply refrained from naming them, or whether he was merely raising a theoretical possibility, was left opaque.

In the introduction to *The First Urban Christians* Meeks explained what he had in mind as appropriate method by referring to Clifford Geertz's view of ethnography as an interpretive description of culture. Geertz himself described his project in his 1973 work *The Interpretation of Cultures* as "thick description," meaning the process in which there was a layering of all sorts of interpretations: those of the ethnographer, the informant, and the people themselves.³² For Meeks, following Geertz, theory was necessary, but it had to stay closer to the ground than was the case with other sciences. Meeks advocated an eclectic use of social theory that seemed to set Comte and Geertz at the extremes but

virtually ignored the huge middle ground between those extremes—occupied, for example, by the towering figure of Max Weber.

A very different approach to the appropriation of the social sciences appeared in John Elliott's and Bruce Malina's reviews of *The First Urban Christians*.³³ They criticized Meeks for not using social-scientific insights where they were available and for not having gone far enough in his use of social-scientific ideas that he did employ. Thus, these reviewers criticized him for his use of concepts such as "city," "conflict," and "ritual" without giving them any or enough theoretical attention when there was (and is) a huge and relevant social-scientific literature available.

The Work of Susan Garrett

In 1992, Susan Garrett, who had been one of Meeks's brilliant crop of doctoral students at Yale, published an entry in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entitled "Sociology of Early Christianity." The title was a misnomer (presumably the editors' fault, not hers), since she dealt with anthropology as much as sociology.³⁴ This was a fair-minded but flawed treatment of the subject. Here she adopted a line similar to that of Meeks in the introduction to *First Urban Christians* (although argued with much greater detail and nuance) by defending "sociological" (by which I suggest she meant "social-scientific") interpretation, but only on the basis that it be "interpretive" and characterized by "thick description" (as in Geertz's ethnography) and not model-oriented in nature. She was attracted to Geertz's advocacy of the total immersion by the ethnographer in a culture that enabled his or her interpretive analysis of its symbols. She saw model use as "nomothetic"—that is, as tied up with the promulgation of social "laws"—as too scientific, and as "positivist." While, like Meeks, she did not explain precisely what form of positivism she had in mind or the social theorists who were advocating it, she too was possibly haunted by the ghost of Auguste Comte.³⁵ Unlike Meeks, however, she did name biblical critics who typified the approach she decried (while also pointing out the strengths of their work), such as John Elliott, Bruce Malina, and Jerome Neyrey. Once again the choice was "thick description" of the Geertzian type or model use allegedly based on appeal to social laws; the virtuous "induction" of the interpretivists or the alleged "deduction" of the model users. She, too, ignored the middle ground between these extremes. She noted the social-scientific critics' complaint "that works of social history description are

typically intuitive and ethnocentric, and they are rendered obscure by their authors' failure to make theoretical presuppositions explicit and open to inspection,"³⁶ but without acknowledging the inescapable truth and significance of this charge.

By way of critique of Garrett's view, I will make three points.³⁷ First, in reply to her misplaced claim that the interpretive method facilitates intercultural translation of meaning in a way that model use does not,³⁸ I will briefly recall my support for the suggestion of Philippe Descola. According to Descola, excessive concentration on particularity of the sort espoused by Geertz, and advocated by Meeks and Garrett, results in the failure to produce an interpretive framework that is necessary for the discussion of cultural differences, which results in a kind of "cultural apartheid."³⁹

Second, there is the practical problem that the total immersion by a trained observer in another culture necessary to generate a "thick description" of it is impossible for anything other than a contemporary culture. Of all social-scientific methodologies, this is probably the least suited for work with historical evidence. Apart from a handful of works meriting notice with their soft glaze of Geertz, such as Meeks's *First Urban Christians* and Garrett's own accomplished 1989 monograph *The Demise of the Devil*,⁴⁰ appeal to the Geertzian method of thick description has not been particularly fruitful in generating significant new exegesis of biblical texts. It has, indeed, proved something of a dead end. Moreover, whereas in 1983 Meeks proposed a form of social history tinged with Geertzian "interpretive description" as its social-scientific component, the predictable failure of the Geertzian method to be of long-term benefit has left social history bereft of social-scientific support. Social history has become, in effect, a form of empiricism, whose practitioners regularly employ concepts such as "kinship," "identity," "ethnicity," and so on without subjecting these ideas to the social-scientific modeling they require for clarity of application. On the other hand, the use of social-scientific models in biblical interpretation permits intercultural communication, does not require in-depth exposure to living informants, and is a flourishing field of biblical interpretation today.

Finally, as I stated in my response to Garrett in 1995:

The main problem with Garrett's analysis is that its image of "positivist" model-using is a stalking-horse having no resemblance to social-scientific interpretation as it is actually practiced. New Testament critics who employ this method . . .

certainly do not claim that there are social laws, or that their results are "objectively valid" (although since they certainly reject the view that one historical opinion is as good as another, they may well claim that their views are more plausible than some). No ontological status is accorded to the models; they are seen merely as heuristic tools. Either they throw up a set of new and interesting questions, which the texts themselves must answer, or they do not. Models which do not have this result will be discarded and replaced with others.⁴¹

In Defense of Model Use

To my knowledge, no biblical critic using social-scientific models appeals to or believes in "social laws." Indeed, as long ago as 1981 John Elliott had stated in his *Home for the Homeless* that social-scientific exegesis was not concerned with "social laws."⁴² I have been denying that there were "social laws" since my first academic publication, which heavily utilized social-scientific models, in 1987.⁴³ In none of my dealings with the Context Group since its formation in 1990 have I seen any sign that any of them appealed to or believed in "social laws." Along with Max Weber, we do subscribe to a belief in social regularities, something John Elliott made clear as long ago as 1981,⁴⁴ but these, as I will explain below, are certainly not "social laws."

The phrase "social law" is not language employed by those using social-scientific models; it is not insider language. Rather, it is inaccurate discourse, like the charge of "positivism," mobilized by outsiders hostile to the enterprise. I am drawn to the conclusion that such views are triggered by a perhaps understandable unhappiness with work where there is arguably too much model and too little data,⁴⁵ or where models are being utilized way beyond their use-by date.

Perhaps it is really a question of taste. Some exegetes are comfortable with theory and some are not. Some of us like to subject the dominant concepts and frameworks we use to social-scientific clarification and enrichment and some do not. Model users—like the authors of the essays that follow in this volume—belong in the former camp, but we certainly do not see the arguments as equally balanced: if the unexamined life is not worth living, the unexamined concept is not worth using.

CHAPTER TWO

Social-Scientific Analysis of the Old Testament

A BRIEF HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

Philip F. Esler and Anselm C. Hagedorn

Chapter 1 of this volume made a case—in relation to the social-scientific methodology of the Max Weber—for the intellectual integrity and value of seeking to interpret the Old Testament using models drawn from the social sciences. In chapters 3 to 17 the contributors bring various social-scientific models and perspectives to bear upon a variety of Old Testament issues and texts, while the last three chapters address certain hermeneutical questions that arise in relation to such investigation.

Yet the application of the social sciences to understanding phenomena from ancient Israel is hardly new. Indeed, it traces its lineage back to the nineteenth century. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a scholarly context for the essays in this volume, both as to the history of the exercise and as to the main ideas that have pushed it on. We hope at the same time to cover most of the bibliographic milestones in social-scientific interpretation of the Old Testament, although for complete coverage there are a number of texts that survey various parts of the field.¹

The Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Pioneers

Anthropology

Writing in 1951, E. E. Evans-Pritchard divided the history of anthropology into three periods.² The first ran roughly from the eighteenth