

Teaching & Learning Guide for: Social Science Approach to the Hebrew Bible

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Author's Introduction

The social science approach to the Hebrew Bible has steadily gained in popularity in recent years. It is heir to the older and formerly dominant historical critical approach to the Bible but focuses on society as whole instead of just kings, high priests, and the elite. And it goes beyond the also popular social history approach by incorporating social theory into its interpretation of texts and Israelite society. It transforms the two dimensional portrayal of biblical characters in Scripture into three dimensional flesh and blood figures whose lives are motivated and shaped by larger societal forces. The social science approach also aids in foregrounding the 'Otherness' of the biblical text, demonstrating how the biblical text reflects a culture that is unfamiliar to our modern Western world. It also serves as a check against the currently popular literary critical approach to the Bible that has a tendency to blunt that strangeness of the ancient text and read modern cultural assumptions and notions back into the same text. But the social science approach has also become more postmodern, and its adherents are not naïve about how their own social locations influence the way they interpret Scripture and the choices they make regarding what models they apply to the biblical text. Biblical sociologists have also become more skeptical about the reliability of ancient texts for reconstructing socio-historical reality because of their inherently biased character and have proposed ways to separate the wheat from the chaff. And finally, the social science approach has become more self-conscious of the speculative nature of applying theoretical models to ancient texts and the danger of making the text fit the model. However, in spite of this, biblical sociologists believe it is worth the risk and that their approach makes an important contribution to biblical criticism and that it makes biblical studies exciting and relevant.

Online Materials

1. <http://www.kchanson.com/>

A fascinating site from a New Testament sociologist. It contains tremendous amounts of information including archaeological photos, bibliographies (e.g. 'The Old Testament: Social Sciences & Social Description'), and numerous links to other related sites like Ancient World on the Web (with over 250 www-sites) and to electronic journals.

2. <http://virtualreligion.net/vri/>

Its Biblical Studies: Social World of the Bible provides links to electronic journals and other related sites, some with photos.

3. <http://sites.google.com/site/biblicalstudiesresources/>

This site has a Hebrew Bible Resources category that includes electronic journals and the homepages of three Hebrew Bible sociologists: Don Benjamin, David J. A. Clines, and Philip Davies, with some of their articles.

4. <http://courses.missouristate.edu/VictorMatthews/>

Homepage of a preeminent Hebrew Bible anthropologist and Ancient Near Eastern expert that contains bibliographies and numerous links to other related sites and to electronic journals.

5. <http://www.socioweb.com/>

The Socio Web has links to great sites that often have articles on various sociological topics and social theorists.

6. <http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/index.html>

A Sociological Tour Through Cyberspace is an amazing site that is colourful and filled with articles about and guides to various aspects of sociology and links to numerous related sites.

7. <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/w3virtsoclib/index.html>

WWW Virtual Library: Sociology: Theories has wonderful articles on the primary theorists in sociology and related resources.

8. <http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2005/0100/0101.php#trans>

The Denver Journal has various related resources, and its Annotated Old Testament Bibliography: Sociological and Anthropological Studies is helpful.

Annotated Reading List

1. Weber, Max. *Ancient Judaism*. Translated by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale. New York: Free, 1952

So fortuitous for biblical sociologists, one of the fathers of sociology theorizes on the development of the Israelite religion from a comparative religion standpoint; a classic. It is not the easiest read, so it should be reserved for graduate students.

2. Gottwald, Norman K. *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 bce*. Paperback ed. The Biblical Seminar. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999

The father of modern Hebrew Bible sociology draws on Durkheim, Weber, and especially Marx to trace the development of the early Israelite faith that sprang from a confederation of recently liberated peasants; another classic. Compare the following reviews: Bernhard W. Anderson (*Theology Today* 38 [1981]: 107–8 – mainly critical); Robert R. Wilson (*Interpretation* 38 [1982]: 71–4 – generally positive); Carol Meyers (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 [1981]: 104–9 – somewhat positive).

3. Gottwald, Norman K. *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009

This abridged version of the 1985 classic introduces the student broadly to biblical sociology and then applies it book by book to the Hebrew Bible. Compare the following

reviews of the unabridged version: J. J. M. Roberts (*Theology Today* 43 [1987]: 580–1 – generally negative); Robert Gnuse (*Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 [1986]: 174–5 – generally positive).

4. Carter, Charles E. and Carol L. Meyers, eds. *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible. Sources for Biblical and Theological Study* 6. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996

The standard anthology of articles by Hebrew Bible sociologists, early and more recent, with a helpful brief history of the field. It is organized according to classic studies, their assessment, and case studies.

5. Simkins, Ronald A. and Stephen L. Cook, eds. *The Social World of the Hebrew Bible: Twenty-Five Years of the Social Sciences in the Academy*. Semeia 87; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999

A more recent anthology of articles by Hebrew Bible sociologists, most of whom are members of the Society of Biblical Literature national convention section The Social Sciences and the Interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. A very helpful synopsis of the field, the bulk consisting of case studies, and two responses to the articles by Frank Frick and Norman Gottwald.

6. Chalcraft, David J., ed. *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism. The Biblical Seminar* 47; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997

Another standard anthology that retrieves samples of the field from *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. Several British contributors are represented. Entries are grouped according to various sociological/anthropological facets.

7. Clements, R. E., ed. *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989

Another older anthology that includes mainly British contributors, who were all Members of the Society for Old Testament Study. Essays are also grouped according to various sociological/anthropological facets.

8. Matthews, Victor H. and Don C. Benjamin. *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 BCE*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993

Another classic – A helpful undergraduate level integration of the anthropological approach and Ancient Near Eastern literature applied to the biblical world. It is organized according to the various social facets of a typical Israelite's life.

9. Sparks, Kenton L. *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and their Expression in the Hebrew Bible*. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998; Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300–1100 bce*. Society of Biblical Literature: Archaeology and Biblical Studies, 9; Atlanta: Scholars, 2005

Sparks' work represents a good example of a monograph devoted to a social science issue. He eclectically draws on models of ethnicity, but his work is primarily a historical and literary study, with a comparative Ancient Near Eastern component, of how the Israelites conceived of their ethnicity. He rejects archaeological approaches that focus on material remains, like pottery, for determining ethnicity, and this is why his work needs to be compared with that of Killebrew, an archaeologist.

Sample Syllabus

The following could form the basis for implementing an advanced undergraduate or regular graduate course on this topic.

1. Feasibility?

Rodd discredits the notion of applying the social sciences to the Bible because it is not falsifiable, while Sanders provides an example of how this is a false dichotomy.

Cyril S. Rodd, 'On Applying a Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies,' in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, 22–33.

Seth L. Sanders, 'Parallel Literary Editions of Joshua and the Israelite Mythologization of Ritual,' in *Anthropology & Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (ed. Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar; Leiden: Deo, 2004), 120–39.

2. Comparative Methodology

The article by Esler defends the use of models, which are comparative based, and Lang presents an example of a direct comparison.

Philip Esler, 'The Context Group Project,' in *Anthropology & Biblical Studies*, 46–61.

Bernhard Lang, 'The Hebrew Wife and the Ottoman Wife: An Anthropological Essay on Proverbs 31:10–31,' in *Anthropology & Biblical Studies*, 140–57.

3. Reductionistic?

Herion shows how modernistic assumptions, including reductionism, influences biblical sociologists. Lawrence briefly but effectively addresses the issue of reductionism in anthropological approaches to Scripture. Gottwald shows the social science approach's relation to other types of biblical interpretation.

Gary A. Herion, 'The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History,' in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, 78–108.

Louise J. Lawrence, "Introduction: A Taste for 'the Other': Interpreting Biblical Texts Anthropologically," in *Anthropology & Biblical Studies*, 18–20.

Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction*, chap. 1.

4. Positivistic?

Herion shows how modernistic assumptions, including positivism, influences biblical sociologists. Brett shows how Herion's solution to these problems is faulty. Frick shows how this liability can actually have a positive function hermeneutically.

Gary A. Herion, 'The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History,' in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, 78–108.

Mark G. Brett, 'Literacy and Domination: G. A. Herion's Sociology of History Writing,' in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, 109–34.

Frank S. Frick, 'Sociological Criticism and Its Relation to Political and Social Hermeneutics: With a Special Look at Biblical Hermeneutics in South African Liberation

Theology,' in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), 225–38.

5. Socio-Historical Determinism?

Gottwald essentially argues that Yahwism emerged directly from socio-historical conditions. Mayes critiques Gottwald from a Weberian perspective, where ideas have a somewhat independent status.

Norman K. Gottwald, 'Domain Assumptions and Societal Models in the Study of Pre-Monarchic Israel,' in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, 170–81.

Andrew D. H. Mayes, 'Idealism and Materialism in Weber and Gottwald,' in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, 258–72.

6. Interdisciplinary Credibility?

Usually we think in terms of biblical scholars who learn social theory and apply it to texts. Douglas represents an anthropologist who turns to the Bible. Berlinerblau has PhDs in both biblical studies and sociology.

Mary Douglas, 'The Abomination of Leviticus,' in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, 119–34.

Jacques Berlinerblau, 'Ideology, Pierre Bourdieu's *Doxa*, and the Hebrew Bible,' in *The Social World of the Hebrew Bible*, 193–214.

7. Social Realia in the text?

Berlinerblau criticizes attempts by biblical scholars to naively discern a popular religion within an elitist text. Carroll R. represents an attempt to tackle this issue post-Berlinerblau.

Jacques Berlinerblau, "The 'Popular Religion' Paradigm in Old Testament Research: A Sociological Critique," in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism*, 53–76.

M. Daniel Carroll R., "Re-examining 'Popular Religion': Issues of Definition and Sources. Insights from Interpretive Anthropology," in *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts: Contribution from the Social Sciences to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. M. Daniel Carroll R.; JSOTSup 299; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 146–67.

8. Literary and Sociological Approaches

Janzen represents a literary critical reading of the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter that views the author's characterization of Jephthah as villainous. Compare this with Susan Niditch, a biblical folklorist, who draws the opposite conclusion.

David Janzen, 'Why the Deuteronomist Told About the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (2005): 339–57.

Susan Niditch, *Judges* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 124–35.

Focus Questions

1. How can biblical sociologists apply current social science tools and theories, based on largely living societies and therefore testable, to an ancient dead society?
2. How can one utilize an ancient text for socio-historical information if that text is inherently biased itself?
3. Can religious and theological ideas be reduced to sociological phenomenon? Do they have an independent truth and value? Are the social sciences inherently reductionistic?
4. Is there such a thing as social causation? Can ideas be causative or is causation limited to socio-historical conditions?
5. Is biblical sociology really scientific or does it involve a subjective dimension? Is it more an art?
6. Is it really possible for a biblical scholar to adequately learn another field like anthropology and apply it to the Bible?
7. Is the use of models to interpret the Bible really legitimate? Won't models force generalities back onto the particularities of the text?
8. Do recent literary critical approaches to Scripture make social science approaches obsolete? Is there a place for both?

Seminar Activity

Divide students into three groups and let them interpret a biblical text, a theme, or social facet of ancient Israel from a Marxist, Durkheimian, and Weberian perspective respectively. The groups should do this independently of each other, and when completed, let each group present their results in a forum discussion.