

## Social-Scientific Approaches

Generally speaking, the social sciences study living societies, but around the end of World War II scholars began to apply social-scientific methods and models to the study of societies from the past. These approaches grew out of insights into the social dimension of human living and its impact upon events. Over the last twenty years social-scientific criticism has become a specialist field of research and interpretation within biblical studies. Perhaps no field of research has seen such a major growth of analyses from a social-scientific perspective than research in realm of early Christianity.

Despite its relatively brief history social-scientific criticism has a 'prehistory' within historical-critical approaches to the Bible. Indeed it could be argued that no historical research can be undertaken without including aspects of the social dimension of life, in terms of methodology as well as areas analysed. But explicit application of social-scientific methods only began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was no doubt related to certain developments and movements within the wider societies of the Western world. Although most social-scientific criticism has taken place in North America one of the most influential scholars in this field was the German Gerd Theissen who was one of the first to analyze the early Jesus movement by applying social-scientific methods. He argued that many of the sayings recorded in the Gospels reflect the social role of 'itinerant radicals' who had been forced out of the social structures of their society, because of socio-economic circumstances, and were now wandering about preaching Jesus' message. Theissen elaborated these ideas and expanded them into the book *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. His work has not remained uncontested but despite criticisms it still has great influence on all branches of social-scientific criticism. Another pioneering practitioner of social-scientific methods is Wayne A. Meeks, whose most important work is an analysis of Pauline Christianity using various social-scientific models and typologies, entitled *The First Urban Christians*.

Within this sub-discipline of biblical interpretation the perception of the various approaches varies quite a bit as scholars emphasize different aspects inherent to it. Thus some scholars see themselves as widening historical-critical approaches in that they seek to explore 'real life' through and behind the text in trying to establish what earlier form criticism called the 'Sitz im Leben', that is the social setting of the text. Other scholars perceive themselves in relation to concepts and models developed in sociology and anthropology in relation to contemporary societies and apply such models to ancient Israelite societies and the early Christian movement. Still some scholars do not use labels such as sociology or social history for their research but rather refer to it as 'cultural anthropology' (e.g. Malina).

Thus there is not one single uniform approach which could be subsumed under the heading of 'social' approach to the Bible. Rather there is a spectrum of approaches which differ more or less from each other and which are engaged in a discussion as to what precisely an appropriate social-scientific method in relation to the Bible should be. The main issue is whether and/or to what extent social-scientific models (which are gained from analyses of contemporary societies) can provide helpful analytical tools without becoming rigid or anachronistic presuppositions of interpretation. Despite such discussions the scholars engaged in them share the conviction that religion, and thus also the biblical texts are woven into, and are expressions of networks of social interactions and therefore social-scientific methods can contribute to the interpretation of these texts.

In the articles included in this unit there are contributions from different approaches within this sub-discipline.

### **Essential Readings:**

David G. Horrell, 'Social-Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament: Retrospect and Prospect', in *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation*, ed. by David G. Horrell (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 3-27.

Bruce J. Malina, 'Bible Study and Cultural Anthropology', in Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 1-24.

Norman K. Gottwald, 'Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel', in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. by Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993), pp. 142-53.

Philip F. Esler, 'Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation', in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context*, ed. by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 3-14.

Keith W. Whitelam, 'The Social World of the Bible', in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 35-50.

### **Further Readings:**

Dale B. Martin, 'Social-Scientific Criticism', in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, ed. by S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pp. 125-43.

David G. Horrell (ed.), *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

J. H. Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Philip F. Esler (ed.), *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

W. Stegemann, B. J. Malina, and G. Theissen (eds), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983 [2nd edn, 2003]).

Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell (eds), *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective* (Cascade Companions 15; Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012).

## **Activity**

In what way do social-scientific approaches contribute to broaden the understanding of biblical texts beyond historical-critical approaches?

What can be gained from applying social-scientific models to biblical texts?

What are the limitations of social-scientific approaches to biblical interpretation?

From the insights gained from social-scientific approaches interpret a biblical text with the help of the following grid:

- Who is involved?
- What is happening/is said?
- When do things happen – the question of time – past-present-future
- Where do things happen?
- How do things happen?
- Why do things happen? Explanation ‘behind’ the text