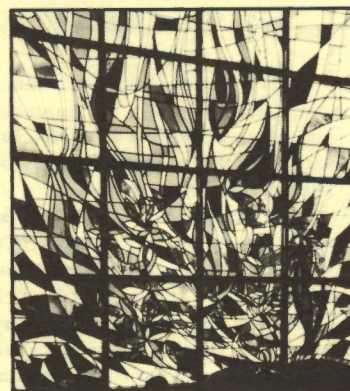


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Using the Social Sciences to Read the New Testament: The Emergence of a New Perspective on Early Christianity

by
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Introduction

Students of Christian origins have always been fascinated by the social context in which Jesus, his immediate followers, and the first mission communities lived. As early as 400 CE, St. John Chrysostom wrote:

"I wish that it was possible to meet with one who could deliver to us the history of the Apostles, not only all they wrote and spoke of, but of the rest of their daily life, even what they ate, and when they ate, when they walked, and where they sat, and what they did every day, in what parts they were, into what house they entered, and where they lodged—to relate everything with minute exactness, so replete with advantage is all that was done by them . . ."

It is only in the last several decades, however, that this interest has evolved into a method for describing and analyzing the sociology of early Christianity. This development has produced a new way of reading early Christian literature, often called "social-scientific exegesis." The emergence of the social-scientific approach represents an important additional way of looking at the New Testament and other Christian literature, and its utilization has opened new debates and shed new light on old ones.

The Rise of the Social-Scientific Approach

The discipline of sociology is itself a relative new-comer to the academic scene, arising out of nineteenth century Europe and the social upheaval occasioned by the industrial

revolution. Relatively soon afterwards, various thinkers began to realize the potential of this new way of looking at human activity for the study of Christian origins. Friedrich Engels, for example, applied sociological categories to early Christianity when he argued that it was a movement of the oppressed proletariat. Ernst Troeltsch, applying Darwinian rather than Marxist principles, concurred with Engels that Christianity arose among the lowest social classes. These groups, he felt, were the originators of all new religious movements (which then follow an "evolutionary" trajectory).

Max Weber, often considered the "father" of modern sociology, was also interested in early Christianity. Partly out of his study of Jesus and Paul, he developed his theory of "charismatic leadership." Weber argued that a charismatic movement has a short life span, and therefore it either dies out or undergoes a process of "institutionalization," a process he saw at work in the Pauline Mission.

Biblical scholars in the early part of the twentieth century, aware of these new intellectual currents, began to think about ways their discipline could utilize them. Herman Gunkel was a pioneer in "form criticism," a method of reading biblical texts that attempts to identify the "form" in which biblical traditions circulated orally before being written down. As part of that study, Gunkel wanted to be able to specify the *Sitz im Leben*, or "life-situation," in which these oral traditions would have been preserved. This was in part a social-scientific question, since it asked with what social context a particular form (for example, "wisdom say-

ings" such as those in the Book of Proverbs) would be associated. Rudolph Bultmann suggested the same approach for the New Testament.

At the same time in the United States, several scholars at the University of Chicago were active in developing a "socio-historical" method for studying early Christianity. H. Richard Niebuhr, S.J. Case, and S. Matthews were collectively known as the "Chicago school." Their sociological approach to early Christianity was connected to the movement in Protestant Christianity in that era known as the "social gospel."

The movement in biblical studies towards use of sociological categories and methods, however, was cut short by the two world wars and the consequent collapse of confidence in social progress within intellectual circles. Exegetes reverted to much more personal, individualistic methods of study. For example, the period after the wars saw the rise of "reduction criticism," a method which seeks to determine the personality and theology of the individual author by how she/he handles traditional material (for example, one determines the theology of "Matthew" by how she/he edits, re-arranges, and supplements "Mark" and "Q").

In the 1970's, however, biblical scholars rediscovered an interest in social context. As Richard Horsley has observed, two factors were largely responsible. First, scholars were increasingly frustrated with traditional philological and theological methods. Many of the problems these methods were designed to address had been the object of prolonged study by generations of scholars, and the possibility of significant new insights seemed

remote. Second, biblical scholars, along with their colleagues in other branches of learning, witnessed (and in many cases participated in) the social upheavals of the fifties and sixties. The involvement of religious groups in America in issues like the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War prompted an awareness among scholars that what people believe theologically is in part determined by the social context in which they are located.

Since the seventies, there has been an explosion in the number of books and articles devoted to the social analysis of early Christianity. The major professional associations for biblical scholarship have recognized the emergence of the method by creating permanent consultations and seminars. The current state of social-scientific exegesis has been summarized by John Gager:

"The fact of the matter is that social-scientific approaches to the New Testament have come to be practiced and accepted quite broadly within the international community of biblical scholars. Indeed, it is now possible to speak of something fundamentally new in biblical studies, not in the sense that older and more traditional approaches have been rendered obsolete, but rather that a new set of assumptions has made it possible to understand early Christianity in significantly new ways."

Issues in Social-Scientific Criticism

H.C. Kee, one of the practitioners of this new method, has suggested that there are basically six sorts of issues being raised by social-scientific exegetes.

(1) Social Description

Scholars attempting to empirically delineate the "social context" of a particular text or community are said to be engaging in "social description." Essentially, this amounts to the specification of the economic, political, and cultural factors which bear upon the interpretation of some aspect of early Christianity. As distinct from older approaches to "New Testament background," however, scholars engaged in contemporary social description do not understand second temple Judaism and Greco-Roman culture as monolithic, static constants which served as stage-setting for the emergence of early Christianity. Rather, "social context" is understood as something that varies with the temporal and geographic setting.

Certain aspects of the work of Richard Horsley, a scholar mentioned above, illustrate this approach. In *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (1978), Horsley objects to the manner in which some scholars use the term "zealots" to refer to a diverse group of resistance movements spanning two centuries, which were neither organizationally nor ideologically unified. No group calling itself the "zealots" existed prior to the first Jewish

war of 66-70 CE. The persistence of belief in a single, on-going source of armed resistance to Roman rule in Jewish Palestine is partly due to its use by scholars as a foil for comparison to the "Jesus movement," as a way to demonstrate its allegedly "pacifist" character. This comparison rests on inattention to the complexities of the social description of first century Palestine, and this realization has been one of the contributions of social-scientific study.

(2) Social Dynamics/Roles

Scholars frequently go beyond the mere description of social realities and attempt to "explain" those realities in light of some more general theory or model. This is a natural objective for any scientific endeavor, although it raises troubling methodological questions which will be addressed below. One of the figures most associated with the new interest in social analysis of early Christianity in the seventies, John Gager, provides an example of the attempt to "explain" social dynamics.

Gager's *Kingdom and Community* (1975) analyzed early Christianity as a millenarian movement in comparison to similar modern movements in Melanesia and Polynesia. Jesus is pictured as a charismatic prophet who galvanizes a movement out of preexisting alienation and unrest. Gager develops a typology that includes a short life-span based on the failure of the movement's prophecies. Given this, he asks why early Christianity escaped the dissolution typical of such movements. In response, Gager draws upon theories of cognitive dissonance, in which the Christian missionary impulse may be understood as a compensating response to empirical disconfirmation of belief in an imminent end of the world.

Gager's approach is heavily theoretical, and he never explicitly defends the applicability of the models (millenarian movements, cognitive dissonance) which he employs. His work has elicited a number of hostile reviews, often with justified critical reactions. Nevertheless, he has provided a powerful stimulus to the development of social-scientific analysis, particularly in the methodological refinement of approaches.

(3) Anthropological Approaches

The precise distinction between "cultural anthropology" and "sociology" is difficult to locate. Functionally, Kee considers anthropology the study of the system of symbols by which a community interprets its experience. The study of 1 Peter by J.H. Elliott (*A Home for the Homeless*, 1981) provides an illustration.

By means of looking at how key self-descriptive terms in the text are used, Elliott comes to the conclusion that the community behind 1 Peter was a "conversionist sect" in Asia Minor. This sect found itself threatened in an alien environment, and their vocabulary reflected this sense of themselves as "displaced." Further, the community perceived itself as oppressed and as occupying a "second-class" status, somewhere between

full citizens and slaves. The emphasis upon salvation in the text, therefore, reflects the social situation of the community.

Although many have questioned the usefulness of Elliott's proposal for the community's social status (what does a "second-class citizen" mean?), he has restored the necessary social sense to the symbols in the text. Terms like "alien" and "stranger" are not theological concepts reflecting a sense of "Christian exile," but rather have a definite social import.

(4) Sociology of Knowledge

Specialists in this area of sociology have established that "meaning" is something that arises only in a social context, so that what a person understands by a given word or phrase is determined by the usage of the term within a particular socio-cultural setting. Therefore the "semantic range" of a word, gesture, symbol, etc., will vary depending on how it has been used by a specific group. Further, the exegete cannot stop simply at articulating the explicit statements in a text, but must also identify the unexpressed shared assumptions that determine how the community receives the overt statements.

H.C. Kee (whose scheme for categorizing social-scientific exegesis we are following) provides an example of this approach. He rejects the position taken by many New Testament scholars that the healing miracles of Jesus recorded in the gospels functioned to legitimate him as a "divine man." Kee contends that this is the wrong frame of reference for a first century Jewish-Palestinian audience. For this group, Jesus' healings would have been interpreted from an apocalyptic perspective as signs of God's intervention of behalf of Israel. They were signs of impending deliverance, not of the presence of a divine figure. Kee demonstrates that for an explicit claim ("Jesus performed miracles") to have significance for a community, that community must have a frame of reference in which to integrate the claim ("miracles are signs of the end-times"). Hence the task of the interpreter must always include attention not only to the claim (and possible parallels), but also to the cultural environment that gives that claim significance.

(5) Linguistics

Sociolinguistics is an application of the principle stated above: meaning arises in a social context, and hence linguistic expressions have a social history which must be examined in order for meaning to emerge.

Eugene Nida may be taken as illustrative. He distinguishes between morphology (form), semantics (meaning), and syntax (grammar). Unlike the other two, semantics can undergo rapid change, so that the aim of the translator is to be aware of the possibility of changes in meaning even within apparently identical verbal expressions. Terms like "law" and "faith" obviously encompass a wide range of semantic possibilities to which the exegete must be alert.

Call for Papers:

Magic in the Ancient World

Lawrence, Kansas
August 20-23, 1992

The Department of Religious Studies (University of Kansas, Lawrence) and the Magical Texts project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity are co-sponsoring a conference, "Magic in the Ancient World."

The conference will focus on the phenomenon called 'magic' in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures up to the advent of Islam. A broad range of issues will be covered, from methodology (definition and taxonomy) to presentations of editions of new texts. The plenary speaker will be Jonathan Z. Smith of the University of Chicago. Proposals and requests for further information should be sent to either:

Paul Allan Mirecki
Dept. of Religious Studies, Smith Hall
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045
Phone: 913/864-4663

or

Marvin W. Meyer
Dept. of Religious Studies
Chapman College
Orange, CA 92666
Phone: 714/997-6602

Paper proposals for the conference should include a cover letter, the title of the paper, and an abstract. The deadline for proposals is January 15, 1992.

Harvard Divinity School Professor to Present KSR Annual Lecture April 9

Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza of the Divinity School of Harvard University will present the annual KSR Lecture at the annual meeting on Thursday, April 9, 1992.

Native of Germany, Professor Fiorenza received her Doctor of Theology degree from the University of Münster in 1970. She served on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame as Professor of New Testament Studies and Theology from 1970 until her recent appointment as Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard University. Her research and extensive publications include books on ministries of women in the Church and on priesthood in the New Testament.

Further information on her career and on the title of her KSR Annual Lecture will be included in the next issue of this *Religion Journal*.

A Letter to Donors

The following letter to potential donors is included to reflect the scope and quality of programs and activities made possible by gifts to the Kansas School of Religion.

November 1991

Dear Friend:

The Kansas School of Religion expresses its gratitude to you for your faithful support in past years. With the volunteered gifts from concerned friends, the KSR has enriched not only the university but people and communities across the state. As a result, the study of religion in the state of Kansas has received national and international recognition.

Your support has allowed KSR to fund the following programs this past year:

Scholarship—Two graduate students selected by the Department of Religion faculty were awarded \$10,000 for 1991-1992.

Library—The growing Moore Library increased its special religion collection to over 12,000 volumes. Hours were expanded with the help of a half-time librarian and a staff of six students. Two computers have been added for student use.

Religion—The journal *Religion* continues to be published three times a year with a readership of 8,500.

Conferences—Over 400 registrants attended the conference entitled "Spirituality and Life Changes." These conferences provide continuing education credit for nurses, social workers and clergy and were held in Parsons, Salina, Hutchinson and Topeka.

Lectures—Judge Deanell Reese Tacha, Circuit Judge of the 10th US Court of Appeals, delivered the 1991 Lecture at the annual KSR Banquet. Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Stendahl Professor of Divinity of Harvard University, will present the 1992 Lecture.

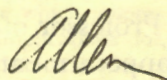
Religious Studies Department—KSR provided support for faculty development and travel to facilitate attendance at professional meetings and to give presentations to study groups in the state. KSR also supported the Department's conference and lecture program, enabling it to bring to campus outstanding scholars.

Smith Hall—KSR maintains the Smith Hall structure and provides free use of the building to the University in cooperation with the Kansas Bible Chair. Major expenditures for the building included the remodeling of a room for use by Graduate Assistants and the installation of a new roof.

We hope you are as excited as we are about our unique activities and the services we provide. You make these programs happen.

WE THANK YOU.

Sincerely,



Allen Wiechert
President

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