

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM 1970's - PRESENT

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

There have been many methodologies that have been developed in the area of Biblical interpretation and understanding. Each one of these methodologies presents a different avenue for exploring and interpreting scripture. Discussed already in this class have been methodologies such as: Rhetorical criticism, Historical criticism, Literary criticism, Form criticism and many others. Social- Scientific criticism can be seen as a sub- discipline of these. Social- Scientific criticism also known as Sociological criticism broadens the horizon for studying the New Testament by allowing for a much deeper level of study by opening doors of study such as anthropology, sociology, and many more social sciences. Social- Scientific criticism is a relatively new method, but encourages methods of study from the past by its profound influence because of its contributions to them.



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<sup>1</sup>Some editing of the format has been done in order to bring the paper into closer conformity to the requirements of the Turabian Style Guide. Dr. Cranford

## SOCIAL- SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM

When looking into Social- Scientific criticism there are several fundamentals that need to be established. The first of these would be a feasible and adequate definition. John Elliott who is a Religious Studies professor at the University of San Francisco in his book entitled *What is Social- Scientific Criticism* states, “Social –scientific criticism of the Bible is that phase of the exegetical task which analyzes the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences.”<sup>2</sup> This is a very broad and generic definition of this methodology, underneath “social and cultural dimensions” several categories could be listed and each one of them having sub categories and so on. Mr. Elliott goes on to narrow his definition by dividing this method into three parts:

In this process it studies (1)not only the social aspects of the form and content of texts but also the conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process; (2) the correlation of the text’s linguistic, literary, theological (ideological), and social dimensions; and (3) the manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and a response to a specific social and cultural context- that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>John H. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>3</sup>Elliott, 7.

These are all parts of the Social- Scientific method of study with which this method helps to re-define and compliment other methods of study. Social Scientific criticism is rich in its appreciation for the correlation between literary, historical factors, forms and so on.

The second of these fundamentals that needs to be explored is the purpose or goal of this methodology. According to Elliot, the goal of the Social- Scientific method, can be defined as “coming to an understanding of a text, its genre, content, structure, meaning, and rhetorical strategy as a vehicle of meaning persuasive discourse in its original historical, social, and cultural context and as a medium of social interaction.”<sup>4</sup> This method looks at both the social and cultural dimensions in which the text was produced so a better understanding can be reached concerning the original audience and writer and purpose. The contemporary Western mindset is not the most appropriate when looking into ancient text, thus creates a need for legitimate research. One author writes, “...New Testament documents speak to us from particular social worlds and need to be investigated using disciplines developed specifically to comprehend the social dimensions of the human experience. Without this, our understanding of the texts will be unnecessarily impaired.”<sup>5</sup>

The third and final fundamental is concerning the different avenues through which data for this methodology is obtained. This method includes an assortment of different fields of study that are comprised for the makeup of this research. Historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists are some of the leading professions in this methodology. These are all relatively new and unexplored areas in the way of understanding and researching text.

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<sup>4</sup>Elliot, 69.

<sup>5</sup>Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

Unlike many of the other methods of interpretation this side of the Atlantic has been much more involved than that of Britain and Europe. There could be no way to list all the contributors to this method throughout history; so this paper will only focus on more of the well known contributors. Elliott pinpoints the emergence of this methodology around the 1970's and considers this the beginning of "... systematic application of the research, concepts, and theory of the social sciences to biblical exegesis and the study of its social world emerged as a programmatic methodological enterprise in the 1970s."<sup>6</sup> The development of this merger did not happen over night there were several pioneers through history that have laid what is now seen as the foundation for this method of study. Elliott gives proper attention to some of these past persons that helped in probing this type of research.

Here particular mention might be made of the pioneering work of such scholars as sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) and his study of ancient Judaism (1919); historian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) and his work *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches ...*; biblical scholar William Robertson Smith (1864-1894)...New Testament exegete and historian Adolf Deissmann (1866-1937) and his concern for the everyday world of ordinary people as illuminated by papyri and inscriptions;...Donald Riddle and Shirley Jackson Case and the "sociohistorical" method typical of their American "Chicago School..."<sup>7</sup>

These are just a few of the people who could be mentioned as having led the way for this new found methodology. There are several leading contemporaries that have made profound contributions in the area of Social Scientific criticism.

John Gager a professor at Princeton University published *Kingdom and Community* in 1975. His book researches the expansion of Christianity under Constantine. Elliott says, "Gager is

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<sup>6</sup>Elliott, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Elliott, 17.

responsible for the potential marriage of exegesis and the social sciences to the attention of the English-speaking world.”<sup>8</sup>

Wayne Meeks who is professor at Yale University is a key contributor to this methodology. In one of his books entitled *The Social World of the First Christians*, he begins to question the world around the first Christians. He began to study and research morals, ethics, other religious activity, government and other issues related to the culture and society of the early church. Wayne Meeks has numerous works in this field and besides an author he is a well respected teacher and has written several well known editorials.

Howard Kee, out of Boston University published his book *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective*. His research was concentrated on both understanding historical facts for reconstruction of Christianity and its beginnings and for a clearer understanding of her literature. His book deals with issues in the New Testament such as cult, social functions, leadership and authority surrounding the early church.

Gerd Theissen has been an enormous instrument in developing Social Scientific criticism. Gerd Theissen a German lecturer at the University of Bonn has published several works in this methodology. Theissen has written several books and has given numerous lectures in this area of study. An extensive biography would have to be produced to adequately give this author the credit that is due him in with his contributions to this methodology. One author writes this about Theissen, “...his studies range widely in their subject matter but in general demonstrate how fresh questions concerning the correlation of belief and behavior, ideas and material conditions, theological symbols and social relations can generate new perspectives on old texts and revisions

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<sup>8</sup>Elliott, 23.

of previously assured texts.”<sup>9</sup> Gerd Theissen has published several well known books in this area especially concerning the Pauline epistles, the early church and the historical figure of Jesus. Several of his books were consulted for the research of this paper.

Fernando Belo, a Portuguese priest who is also a New Testament scholar has had several of his words published. Among his most influential was his lecture on Mark in which he examines social, economic, governmental, and cultural circumstances in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> Belo spurred several of his colleagues to go on and make further contributions to this methodology.

The final of these key contributors is Bruce Malina. Bruce Malina, a professor at Creighton University is most noted for his use of anthropology in the New Testament. Through his use of anthropology and sociological research he uncovered what has been called “pivotal values.” Elliott goes on to say

These values of ancient Circum-Mediterranean culture (such as honor and shame embedded in males and females, respectively, dyadic rather than individual personality, perception of “limited good,” kinship and marriage structures, and the controlling codes of purity and pollution) and convincingly shows how these cultural patterns are implied and expressed in the biblical writings.”<sup>11</sup>

Malina had introduced something new and the first of its kind that would have a lasting effect on the way scripture is read and understood.

There are two mainstreams that grow out of Social Scientific criticism. The first of these is the introduction and application of anthropology to the text. Because of the differences between Western and ancient cultures there is a need for this “under the surface” digging. Bruce

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<sup>9</sup>Elliott, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup>Elliott, 25.

<sup>11</sup>Elliott, 25.

Malina is one of the leading men in this avenue of research. Cultural anthropology fits into biblical interpretation by asking certain questions such as what is lacking, what is going on here, and is there more information needed to make an adequate interpretation. Malina states, "By 'cultural anthropology' I mean that social science that studied human societies and their social systems in a comparative way. Cultural anthropology is essentially concerned with cross-cultural, comparative understanding of person in foreign or alien social groups, especially in terms of how they differ from us and from our social group (s)."<sup>12</sup> Anthropologists are concerned with human behavior and looking at it from a critical viewpoint. They are also interested in comparing these different social and human aspects. To do this adequate and reliable research needs to be acquired about these different subjects.

Such study looks to comparative differences in the way human beings learn to interpret the objects in their environment. These objects notably comprise the major bearers of human meaning: self, others, nature, time, space, and the ALL. Along with interpretations based on and derived from comparison, anthropologists are equally interested in structures or patterns of behavior that human groups create and utilize in order to realize and express the meanings and feelings that are invested in self, others nature, time, space, and the ALL Such structures are called social institutions.<sup>13</sup>

There are numerous ways that this sort of study is seen in the New Testament realm. For Malina and others this is just the tip of the ice berg for an adequate approach to research. Because of the emphasis on the New Testament, Malina's research of the Greco-Roman period will be considered at an elementary level for a better understanding and example of how this methodology is used in the New Testament. When looking into this time period obviously the difference

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<sup>12</sup>Bruce J. Malina. *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean. Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>13</sup>Malina, 6.



between contemporary western culture and ancient Mediterranean culture there are several questions that must be asked. Malina suggests that some of the questions that need to be investigated include what are the traditional values of the Mediterranean? What are traditional Mediterranean social structures: kinship, polity, economics, religion, education?<sup>14</sup> These questions probe deep within the social structure of society and comparing and contrasting different elements of human activity within their social structures as well as with one another.

The second mainstream that is a direct outshoot of this methodology is that this method of study ultimately reconstructs the Social History related to text. It does this by redefining the way Social Historical criticism is approached; it goes underneath the surface researching why things were the way they were. Anthropology is a prime example of a study that is used in reconstructing the Social Historical method. Other social studies are going to be considered as well. The most prevalent are Psychological and Sociology.

Gerd Theissen has a book entitled *Psychological aspects of Pauline Theology*. He suggests that psychological exegesis seeks to describe and explain, as far as possible, human behavior and experience in ancient Christianity. Its foundations are early Christian texts, whether it concludes from them to human behavior and experience or interprets the texts themselves as psychic acts –as acts of praying, appealing thinking, interpreting and evaluation.<sup>15</sup> These are all either human behaviors or experiences that are to be considered.

*Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* is another book by Ger Theissen. This book in particular concentrates on the Sociological aspect of scripture concerning Jesus and the early

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<sup>14</sup>Malina, 6.

<sup>15</sup>Gerd, Theissen. *Psychological aspects of Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 1.

church. The aim of sociology of the Jesus movement is to describe typical social attitudes and behavior within the Jesus movement and to analyze its interaction with Jewish society in Palestine generally.<sup>16</sup> He believes for this to be done properly several boundaries must be made. A distinction must be made between the analysis of roles, of factors and of function. Theissen states, “An analysis of roles investigates typical patterns of behavior; an analysis of factors the way in which this behavior is determined by society; an analysis of function its effects upon society. No attempt is made to find a social ‘first cause’ as economic, ecological, political and cultural factors cannot be separated in their reciprocal interaction.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the content of his book he covers a multitude of topics that he believes play a role in understanding the social aspect in interpretation. He looks into topics such as economic, political, ecological, the wondering Charismatic, the role of the Sympathizer and many more. He believes and gives adequate reasoning why it is important for all these external avenues to be exhaustively researched for a more precise understanding of text and its original meaning.

For a better understanding of what all this means several illustrations will be given. The first of these illustrations will be that of an anthology mindset. There is not much debate that Jesus did not have a great relationship with the Sadducees. The Social- Scientific method would push the envelope by asking why and digging for answers within their social structure. Gerd Theissen researches the history of the Sadducees for answers. He traces the history back all the way to their first appearance and uncovers some of their fundamental beliefs and theological ideas. Once their historical foundation has been made; he then can build upon their social contri-

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<sup>16</sup>Gerd, Theissen. *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 1.

<sup>17</sup>Gerd, Theissen. *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity*, 1.

butions. Then he begins to draw parallels and contrasts to Jesus and the Sadducees and comes to conclusions only after the foundation has been laid.

The relationship between Jesus and Sadducees is ambivalent. Certainly he is closer to the Pharisees than he is to them. In the dispute with the Sadducees he defend the 'Pharisaic' belief in the resurrection against them and in so doing refers to Ex 3.6 , i.e. to a part of the Bible which had the highest authority both for Sadducees and for all other Jews. The dispute might have a historical nucleus: nowhere is there a hind of a legitimization of belief in the resurrection by the Easter faith.<sup>18</sup>

This is just one of the many examples in his book concerning Jesus in his social setting. In this book the whole validity of this method is based upon the "behind the scenes" look that Social Scientific criticism offers.

Another good illustration of this would one of a Socio-Cultural factor. This example is particular is draw from Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. "The quarrel between "the strong" and "the weak" in the Corinthian congregation is a matter of just such different customs. The weak avoid all meat sacrificed to idols since it could never be known with certainty that ritual actions had not accompanied the slaughter of the meat. The strong, on the other hand appeal to their "knowledge": there is only one God; there are no idols and hence "no meat sacrificed to idols" (I Cor. 8:4 ff.)."<sup>19</sup> There are several different ways to look at this scripture according to Theissen. Throughout this section of his book he diligently looks at what constitutes as "strong" and "weak". He offers through somewhat of an exhaustive insight several different aspects to what Paul could be addressing. He offers the difference between official temple meats compared to home meat. He offers the differences between Jews and Greeks for understanding of this

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<sup>18</sup>Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress press), 231.

<sup>19</sup>Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 121.

scripture. He also under the topic of economics suggests, “Paul himself suggests that we look for the weak among the lower strata. It is hardly an accident that the first chapters of the Corinthian letter already give voice to the distinction between strong and weak, connecting this with the social structure of the Corinthian congregation.”<sup>20</sup> He continues to question what is real comparisons being made here and eventually says, “these hypotheses can be tested only by looking for class-specific characteristics in what can still be discerned of the behavior of the weak and the strong, that is behavioral traits which can be correlated with wealth, occupation, and education and thus to a higher or lower social status.”<sup>21</sup>

Now that a social factor and a people group have been illustrated it is appropriate to look at an institution. The institution being looked at is that of marriage in early Palestine.

Marriage is a sexual, economic, and (at times) political and religious relationship contracted between families (or segments of the same family) for a male and a female. In preindustrial, traditional societies, marriage is seldom (if ever) solely an arrangement between a man and woman: this is particularly true of first marriages.<sup>22</sup>

There were several legalities that were laid down for the Israelite marriage.

The impediments to a legal marriage for the Israelites were descent (near relatives as defined in Leviticus 18 and 20) and purity (no Israelite/gentile marriage, an adulteress could not marry her partner in adultery, a man could not remarry his former wife if she had remarried in the meantime, nor could a castrated man or an insane person marry).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity Essays on Corinth*, 124.

<sup>21</sup>Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity Essays on Corinth*, 124

<sup>22</sup>K.C.Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman. *Palestine in the time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1998), 31

<sup>23</sup>K.C.Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, 32.

This of course does not include all of the stipulations or any where near all of the legalities of an Israelite marriage; however, it does give a little more understanding to an ancient Eastern approach to marriage compared to our modern Western ideas.

For the modern reader who is coming to scripture with a contemporary Western mindset, methods such as the Social Scientific method is necessary and begins to explain and explore scripture in its original context and setting. However, any method no matter how solid it is can be misconstrued. This occurs the majority of the times because a reader has a set agenda that he or she wants the text to speak directly to in order to prove a point. This is why it is so important to let the text speak for itself and hear what it has to say for any given topic or theological idea.

There are several critics of the Social Scientific method. Bray mentions several in his analysis of this methodology.

Because of this, analysis done on modern phenomena can be read back into the ancient world on the assumption that all societies function in ore or less similar ways. It will be obvious that supporters of this method are put off by the historians insistence on the uniqueness of any given society's development, and that may retort that is Israel was unique in that way, it is hard to see how or why it should serve as a model for Christians now. On the other hand, there is always a danger that 'typical' phenomena will turn out to be imperfect analogies and produce only highly misleading interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

Elliot makes mention of several presuppositions that the Social Scientific methodology makes. He states, "Social scientific presuppositions, like theological presuppositions, pertain to three aspects of the interpretive enterprise: the interpreters, the objects to be interpreted, and the method of interpretation."<sup>25</sup> He believes that the Social Scientific method can be critiqued in all three of

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<sup>24</sup>Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 512.

<sup>25</sup>Elliott, 36.

these areas, but it needs to be said that this is also true of other methodologies as well. One author who is an advocate for this methodology understands the criticism because of how young this method is and because they believe it has little to contribute in the area of biblical interpretation writes in response to their lack of interest in this methodology “To refuse such assistance seems to involve little more than a reflexive defense of our unfortunate and quite contingent delimitation of academic disciplines, which is itself a subject worthy of sociological investigation!”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Philip, Esler. *The First Christians in their Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social Scientific criticism is a sub discipline of other methodologies of scripture and out from her have sprung other methodologies. This method has broadened the platform on which scripture is studied by opening doors to other social sciences and their application to scriptural texts. There have been several leading scholars in developing this approach each bringing to the table a new idea for exploration. Social Scientific criticism reconstructed the way Historical criticism was used in interpreting scripture as well as for this first time introducing anthropology into the mix of social approaches to scripture.

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