# Social description or social-scientific interpretation?
# A survey of modern scholarship

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Abstract
Social description or social-scientific interpretation?  A
survey of modern scholarship.

Recent interest in the social aspects of the first-century
Mediterranean world reflected in the texts of the New
Testament has taken primarily two directions.  The one
approach concentrates on social description, and the
other on social-scientific interpretation.  This article
surveys the major works of several of the leading expo-
nents of this type of study in terms of the extent to
which they make use of the social sciences.  It differs
from existing surveys by having an in-depth look at the
elements of social-scientific theory and method actually
employed, and by making a comparative assessment of
the importance allocated by different authors to the role
of the text as a deliberate construction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in the situational context of the biblical documents and the traditions which
they contain, is not new.  Well-known attempts at a sociological interpretation of
early Christianity are the *Marxist reading* (Scroggs 1980:177-179) and the *Chicago
school of New Testament studies* (Funk 1976:4-22), both of which have been implicit-
ly or explicitly reductionist in postulating social causes for all religious phenomena
(Schütz 1982:3-11; Meeks 1983:3).  Also, the so-called *form-critical school* had an

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enquiry into the socio-historical background of a text as part of its exegetical programme as early as the beginning of the century. The *Sitz im Leben* interest was concerned with collecting *'explicit evidence* as to social and historical context' (Elliott 1981:3; see also K Berger 1977:219), and used the data for a *social description* of the presumed reconstructed socio-historical background of the texts. The same could be said about earlier investigations - termed 'social' or 'socio-historical' - by scholars such as Lohmeyer, Von Dobschütz, Troeltsch, Matthews and Case (cf Scroggs 1980: 164-165; Schütz 1982:3-11, 21 notes 5 and 16; Osiek 1984:3). The interest was primarily historical in character for theological relevance, and practically nothing can be found in those publications on the subject of social-scientific theory and/or method (Meeks 1983:3). This earlier approach could therefore be termed a *naive description of social setting*, whereby social information was used to undergird and supplement historical supposition.

The nineteen-seventies heralded a renewed interest in the social background of the New Testament documents. A fresh approach was indicated - compared to earlier related efforts - by an appropriation by biblical scholars of the theoretical and methodological insights provided by the social sciences - sociology, anthropology and psychology.

In contrast to the social description for historical relevance that resulted from earlier studies with a social interest (Harris 1984:102-103), the renewed interest by biblical scholars in the social dimension of texts from the outset stated its intention to take cognizance of and utilize the theoretical concepts and empirical methods of the scientific disciplines of sociology, anthropology and psychology, in order to *explain* the productive societal powers that gave rise to the biblical documents. The whole purpose of such an undertaking would be to better understand the text of the Bible. There being no previous guidelines along which to proceed, a theoretical basis and methodological structure for the application of sociological, anthropological and psychological principles to the texts of the Bible had to be constructed. The bewildering diversity of quantitative and qualitative methods and models that these disciplines present, has led to all kinds of exploratory work within the exegetical subdiscipline that has come to be known as the sociology of the New Testament. Different scholars have opted for different approaches, methods and models in trying to uncover new information on the social background of the New Testament (cf Smith 1975:19-21; Scroggs 1980:167-171; Best 1983:187-190; Edwards 1983:431-444; Harrington 1988:77-85).

In the gathering momentum of publications on this new field of interest, the indiscriminate use of the terms 'social' and 'sociological' resulted in the equating of *social description* with *social-scientific explanation* (cf Elliott 1981:3; Malina

1982:241; Osiek 1984:4-6). This is unfortunate, because a genuine social-scientific approach operates on a different level from that of social description. Best (1983:185) distinguishes between two levels of application of social-scientific categories to the New Testament, namely *description* and *explanation* (see also Gager 1979:175), and states:

> For a truly sociological approach, however, one must move to the second level, that of *explanation*. Here the tools and techniques of modern sociological study are used, not merely to describe but also to probe the inner dynamics of the early Christian movement, regarded not as a unique event but as an example of patterns of behaviour which may be widely observed and objectively studied.

> (Best 1983:185)

Gager (1982) has shed even more light on the issue. Referring to an article by Smith (1975:19-20) in which no less than *four* different approaches within this field were distinguished, Gager reserved the description 'sociological' or 'social-scientific' for the approach that, according to Smith, encompassed 'an analysis of Christianity as a social world, as the creation of a world of meaning which provided a plausibility structure for those who chose to inhabit it' (Smith 1975:19-20; cf Domeris 1988:379). Gager states that only such an approach

> can be properly characterized as sociological or, more broadly, social scientific, for it is only here that specific academic disciplines - sociology, anthropology and psychology - have contributed explanatory theories and hypotheses.

> (Gager 1982:258)

It is clear, then, that there is a difference between the reference of the terms 'social' and 'sociological', and that this difference needs further clarification. The most logical way to start would be to take a more detailed look at the different approaches denoted by the above terms, in order to be able to judge the work of the authors under consideration properly.

## 2. SOCIAL VERSUS SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

It has been noted by several scholars that some confusion exists as regards the reference of the above terms (cf Gager 1979:175; Gottwald 1982:143; Schütz 1982:1; Osiek 1984:4). The words have apparently been used interchangeably to refer to the study of any *explicit* data in the New Testament texts on any societal phenomena (both concrete and abstract) in the period of early Christianity, and mainly for the purpose of historical interest. This means that the question facing the interpreter changes from 'What did the author mean?' to 'Was there anything in the contemporary societal structure that this utterance could be a reflection of?' The texts are processed in this way until every scrap of information that might have some social relevance has been tagged and included in a database. Then the database itself is sorted into categories such as 'cultural', 'political', 'economical', and 'religious'. Each of these categories contains the information on the different social institutions that could be assigned to it. Finally, the accumulated information serves as a new source from which to extract the information needed to reconstruct any of the settings that could be deemed connected to an utterance in order to facilitate the understanding of that utterance. Corroboration for the reconstructed setting is sought from both biblical and nonbiblical literary sources from the same period, and from archaeological evidence (Osiek 1984:4). In this way a picture emerges of the time of the origin of early Christianity - a picture containing much detail already, and being added to all the time as new data emerge.

This whole exercise, as well as the results that it may produce, is called by different names: *social analysis, social description, socio-historical approach, social history,* even *sociological analysis.* This is where the confusion starts, and it becomes imperative to delineate the reference of the terms.

The procedure described above can be termed a *social description* or *social history,* but *not* a sociological analysis. A social description *accumulates* data that it regards as relevant in order to contribute to the historical understanding of the background of the New Testament texts or text-segments (Harris 1984:105). When needed, pieces of the amassed information are fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. The structure of the text or the ideological point of view of the narrator or any other literary or *redaktionsgeschichtliche* concepts are of no consequence in this approach. Texts are simply regarded as *sociological informants* of the most basic kind, containing unreflected social data on diverse subjects (see Domeris 1988:379-381 for a concise discussion of social descriptions and histories).

By the term *sociological analysis,* on the other hand, something completely different is meant. It is already clear from previous discussion that 'sociological approach/analysis' refers to the implementation of methods of analysis and research

based on epistemologies relevant to the social sciences. The term has a generic reference, but at the same time it applies to a specific discipline of the social sciences, namely sociology. For the sake of clarification it would therefore be better to replace it with the broader term, that is, *social-scientific analysis*. The purpose of such analysis, to my mind, is not simply to accumulate data. Depending on the end towards which the analysis is done - which is an exposition of the meaning of the narrative discourse as autonomous *object d'art* - it may utilize the results of the former method, while always striving to comprehend and explain the data. A social-scientific analysis *abstracts* data in the sense of unearthing, making explicit what is buried and implicit in the narrative discourse. An analogy to this process can be found in Genette's (1980) narratological theory. He also abstracted the story (*récit*) from the narrative discourse (*histoire*). The analysis of the *récit* concerns the reciprocal relations between the characters (Van Aarde 1988:238).

Methodologically speaking, the only *direct and explicit* social information we have for the contextual history of the text is the literary work itself, constituting a social fact. Social-scientific data within the narrative is not directly accessible or available for a historical (re)construction. Of course it can be, and is being, accessed in that way, but I would regard this as methodologically fallacious. Such data have acquired the characteristics of *literary* elements, and should be analyzed as such. Translating such literary-social data into pure social data fit to be used in a historical (re)construction, is a rather complex procedure. It involves an integration of literary analysis and social-scientific analysis in a way that is beneficial to both disciplines, and, most of all, should deliver results that are able to stand up to critical evaluation. First, a thorough literary analysis should be made of the text, according to its type (i e narrative). Then, on the macro-social level of the relationship between ideas and social reality, the text can be analysed in terms of some macro-theory - Durkheimian, Weberian or Marxist. To use Theissen's terms, such a macro-sociological analysis could be termed a 'structural homologue' (Theissen 1978:26-27, 121 note 8; 1982:190) of the narrative analysis of the work. According to Theissen the concept 'structural homologue' designates a structural correspondence between different entities or phenomena, and by the correspondence a connection is established (Theissen 1978:26). Then, on the micro-social level of the relationship between the author and the reader, and using the results of the macro-sociological analysis, the text can be analysed in terms of communications theory by means of interpretive models from the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. Such analysis would constitute a 'structural homologue' to the literary analysis of reader response. Finally, the results from both the literary and the macro and micro-sociological analyses are used to interpret and explain not the *historical*

world, but the *narrative* or *referential* world of the text. In other words, at this time the interpreter is still moving *within* the text.

Only now can the interpreter use the database constructed by the accumulation of explicit social data, and use it for the purpose of comparison. The explicit data is considered to constitute that which is normal, that is, the 'habitualized activity' associated with the 'typificatory schemes' that apply to everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1967:28-31, 53-54). The narrative world, created by the text, should be compared to the everyday historical world to which the text belongs in order for those elements within the narrative world that are new, different or strange, to be discernible and identifiable. Only on the basis of the information procured in this way can we begin to make inferences about the social setting for which the text was intended.

## 3. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

In this, the main part of the article, the approaches of some of the major exponents of this type of study will be discussed. Only a few South African scholars - such as De Villiers (1984), Joubert (1987; 1990), Domeris (1988), and Botha (1989) - have worked on the subject of the social-scientific study of the New Testament. Several other articles exist which provide readers with an introduction to the social-scientific approach towards the New Testament (e g Scroggs 1980; Malina 1982, 1983; Best 1983; Osiek 1984; Elliott 1986). Most of these works are general surveys of the field of study. The purpose of the present survey is to determine more specifically the nature and content of the social-scientific approach of the scholars under consideration. Works of the following authors, representing the mainstream of the social-scientific study of the New Testament, will be assessed: John H Elliott, John G Gager, Bruce J Malina, Wayne A Meeks, Norman R Petersen, Gerd Theissen. The order in which they are treated is not significant, except that it reflects the approximate chronological sequence in which they published their major works.

### 3.1 Gerd Theissen

In his work entitled *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity* (1978) Theissen uses the sociological method known as *functional analysis*. He analyses the texts in terms of roles, factors and functions in accordance with sociological insights into social dynamics (cf Theissen 1978:4). This entails that he scans the (designated) texts for information or data that can be construed as representing or reflecting matters of sociological interest. The aim of his study is to describe the Jesus movement in terms of its genesis, composition, conduct and influence. This is a purely descriptive

and comparative study. In essence it is the same kind of enterprise as undertaken by the form-critical school in determining the *Sitz im Leben* of a specific phenomenon, albeit in this instance by means of the application of a scientifically constructed, verifiable method or interpretive model from the discipline of sociology.

Theissen (1978:1) makes a distinction between an analysis of roles - which investigates typical patterns of behaviour, an analysis of factors - which investigates the way in which this behaviour is determined by society, and an analysis of function - which investigates the effects of a group on society. He makes no attempt to find a social 'first cause', because economic, ecological, political and cultural factors cannot be separated in their reciprocal interaction.

In another essay on methodology, Theissen (1982:176-177; cf Malina 1982:238 for a similar view) states his conviction that a sociological statement seeks to describe and explain interpersonal behavior with reference to those characteristics which transcend the personal.

> First of all, then, a sociological question is less concerned with what is individual than with what is typical, recurrent, general. Second, it is less concerned with the singular conditions of a specific situation than with structural relationships which apply to several situations.

> (Theissen 1982:177)

The procedure by means of which he proposes to accomplish the sociological task sketched in the quotation above, is that used in the form-critical analysis of texts (see Theissen 1982:177), by which he shows himself to be consistent in his indebtedness to the form-critical tradition for his whole approach.

According to this procedure sociological information has to be extracted from the sources by a process of inference. Three different types of method may be distinguished (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:177; see also Osiek 1984:43):

■ *Constructive conclusions* are drawn from an evaluation of pre-scientific statements which give either *prosopographic* information about the background, status and roles of *individuals* (Scroggs 1980:174), or *sociographic* information about the programme, organization and patterns of behaviour of *groups, institutions, organizations and other larger communities.* According to Theissen (1982:177) there are very few sociographic statements about early Christian groups, while prosopographic statements about individuals are more numerous (Theissen 1982:178). In accordance with social-scientific methods of handling

empirical data, such statements are to be assessed in terms of reliability, validity and representativeness (Theissen 1982:178).

■ *Analytic methods* afford an indirect approach to sociological information. Such methods are used - in the absence of explicit data - to draw inferences from statements about (recurrent) historical events (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:181-182), about conflicts between groups or over ethical and legal norms (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:182-186), and from religious symbols like literary forms and poetic modes of expression, e g parables, structural homologues, et cetera (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:187-191; see especially Theissen 1982:198, note 28 for a discussion on structural homologues).

■ *Comparative methods* are geared towards establishing what is typical for early Christianity. This can be done in one of two ways: either by analysing the *differences* brought forward by a comparison between early Christianity and the surrounding culture, or by analysing the *analogies* between not only the said groups, but also between Christianity and any 'comparable movements, groups, or phenomena of whatever era' (Theissen 1982:192). According to Theissen (1982:192), therefore, it is possible to compare early Christianity to 'all messianic-chiliastic movements, where again and again we find comparable characteristics....' Theissen (1982:194) admits that 'the disadvantage of any such procedure relying on analogies is its relative lack of precision', but still thinks it worthy of investigation. It should be stated in critique against Theissen, however, that this admission negates his own remark about the social-scientific assessment of empirical data in terms of reliability, validity and repre-sentativeness (cf preceding discussion on 'constructive conclusions') - or is it a matter of inadequacy of theoretical explanation?

Concluding his discussion of methodology, Theissen (1982:195) remarks:

> It is not necessary to emphasize that the prospect of achieving an approximate comprehension of the matter to be investigated, by means of adequate statements about it, depends on the plurality, and methodological independence, of various procedures for drawing inferences.

Readers amongst the scholarly community have complained about the lack of reference to social-scientific theory or conceptual models in most of Theissen's work (cf Gager 1979:175; Schütz 1982:15; Osiek 1984:45; Edwards 1983:435; Elliott 1986:11), which makes it difficult to evaluate his approach and the results of his

studies. It is clearly recognized, however, that Theissen has a wide knowledge of social-scientific theory, and can use the aspects of it that are applicable to the material (see for instance Gager 1979:175; Scroggs 1980:174). According to Schütz (1982:16) Theissen is concerned about 'a general critical theory of religion which will also be responsive to the historian's perception of religious data....' Within the general critical theory Theissen's choice for *functionalist analysis* assigns to him an intermediate position between *phenomenological analysis* on the one hand, which proceeds from the assumption that religion has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from normal reality and therefore make it inaccessible to sociological analysis (cf Schütz 1982:16), and *reductionistic analysis* on the other hand, which assigns to all religious phenomena some non-religious origin, and which therefore exposes itself to the criticism of being reductionist (cf Schütz 1982:16; see Malina 1982:237 for a discussion of reductionism as the process of subsuming one model into another).

'Functionalism' as a methodological concept for sociological analysis proceeds from the theoretical assumption that the normal and desired condition for a group or society is to be in equilibrium, because a state of equilibrium is conducive to the proper and efficient functioning of the collective parts of society (cf Elliott 1985:332). Functionalism distinguishes between 'manifest' and 'latent' functions, or, in Theissen's terms, 'subjective intention' and 'objective function' (cf Schütz 1982:17). According to this theory a religious phenomenon's subjective intention (= what it is meant to do) is not (necessarily) the same as its objective function (= what it does). Theissen limits his functionalist analysis to those aspects that serve basic social needs in a specific frame of reference (society); those needs are twofold: the production of order (that is, the integration of the members of that society), and the control and overcoming of conflict through change (cf Theissen 1978:2). Schütz (1982:17) states:

> These polar opposites are not regarded as mutually exclusive virtues (or vices), as if viewed from an ideological presumption of what the social frame should be like. Instead, they are regarded as two ends of a continuum along which all social organisms seek an accommodation or balance of forces.

To this axis, marked by the ends integration-conflict, Theissen adds another axis, marked by the ends creative-restrictive functions of religion. This results in a 'grid of theoretical perspectives on religion on which he is able to locate most of the classical theories, and by means of which he can underline the centrality of the

functionalist approach...' (Schütz 1982:18). For the different aspects compounded into this model, Theissen is dependent upon Durkheim, Marx, Berger & Luckmann, and Weber (cf Gager 1979:175). According to Theissen (1978:2; see also Edwards 1983:435) 'religion can be a social cement and an impulse towards renewal: it can intimidate people and force them to conform, or can help them to act independently. In primitive Christianity the innovative function of religion appears most clearly'.

Precisely because of this stance 'functionalism' should be much more 'palatable' in more conservative theological circles (although Kümmel 1985:343-348 severely criticizes Theissen), and very much in keeping with a position where the historical interests dominate and sociological data are intended to serve a historical reconstruction. One of the criticisms of the functionalist perspective is precisely that it reflects a conservative bias (cf Cohen 1968:58). It is therefore not surprising that Theissen has chosen this approach, considering what has been established about him already, namely his indebtedness and loyalty to the traditional historical-critical approach (see the preceding discussion). That is why it can be said that he leans more toward social history than towards abstract sociological theory in his works (Schütz 1982:20; cf Harris 1984:107). It is also clear, though, that Theissen is not bound to one method - he himself has pleaded for the use of any method if it proves to have heuristic value (Theissen 1978:4-5; 1982:195; see also Scroggs 1980:166-167; cf Elliott 1986:10-26, for a detailed discussion and evaluation of Theissen's functionalist approach; Malina 1982:240, note 18 for criticism on Theissen's use of psychological models).

### 3.2 John G Gager

Gager (1975) published one of the first books in America to employ the social sciences in an investigation into the social setting of the early Church as portrayed in the New Testament (cf Edwards 1983:432). In this work, *Kingdom and community: The social world of early Christianity*, he set out to give a comprehensive sociological account of the social world in which early Christianity had its origins (cf Tidball 1983:26).

According to Harris (1984:107) Gager is 'more intentionally sociological than Theissen', although Edwards (1983:435) maintains exactly the opposite view: 'The work of Gerd Theissen...shows considerably deeper immersion in sociological method'. Be that as it may, Gager does use a variety of sociological and anthropological models, such as conflict theory, the interpretation of symbols, sociology of knowledge and, especially, the theory of cognitive dissonance (cf Gager 1975; see also Malina 1982:235; 1986c:35-55; Edwards 1983:433; Harris 1984:108). Gager uses

a *comparative approach* (cf Harris 1984:108). He studies early Christianity by comparing it with *millenarian movements*, and reasserts his acceptance of the validity of such a comparison several years later: 'I remain convinced that the most important insights into the fundamental character of early Christianity are to be derived from anthropological and sociological studies of popular and millenarian religious movements which have nothing to do with the time or region of the New Testament' (Gager 1982:261). According to Osiek (1984:39) 'Gager attempts...to understand the dynamics of Jesus' ministry and the early years of the Church as a movement of dramatic expectation' (cf also Tidball 1983:27; see Gager 1982:261, notes 21, 22, 23 for bibliographic references to anthropological studies on millenarian movements). The validity of drawing such analogies between early Christianity and (modern) millenarian movements (like the cargo cults) is accepted by some (cf Osiek 1984:40) and disputed by others (cf Edwards 1983:434; Malina 1986c:55; Tidball 1983:37-40).

To account for the fact that early Christianity, unlike other millenarian movements, endured and even grew, Gager used the psychological theory of *cognitive dissonance* - a theory proposed by Festinger (1957) to describe the state brought about in individuals by 'discrepancies between action and cognition' (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225). For example, a smoker who knows that smoking causes cancer but continues the habit, demonstrates an inconsistency between his overt behavior and his knowledge. He is engaging in counter-attitudinal behaviour and thereby becomes prone to cognitive dissonance. Papineau (1978:168) uses the concept *attitudinal consistency* to describe the same phenomenon as is described by *cognitive dissonance*, even citing the same example. According to Papineau (1978:169) attitudinal inconsistency is experienced when two or more potentially conflicting desires are involved. The need to *reduce* attitudinal inconsistence and obtain *consistency* leads to the adoption of certain beliefs. Papineau regards such beliefs that serve to reduce inconsistency as *ideological*: 'The common notion of an "ideological" belief would...be of a belief which is promulgated in order to defend actions or policies which are in the interest of a certain group, by presenting those actions or policies as having results which are accepted as being in the general good' (Papineau 1978:169).

The following definitions of the concept 'cognitive dissonance' are given:

- 'Cognitive dissonance may be described as "psychological tension having motivational characteristics" which occurs when a person has "two cognitions which are somehow discrepant with each other"' (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225, quoting from Brehm & Cohen 1962:3, 11)

■ '[T]he crucial and necessary condition for the production of dissonance is that psychologically the two elements are inconsistent in the sense that the opposite of one follows from the other' (Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:428).

The assumption of the theory is that there is in individuals a tendency toward cognitive *consistency*. Inconsistency, or dissonance, therefore needs to be reduced - the greater the dissonance, the more pressure there is to reduce it (Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:430). Dissonance therefore becomes a *drive* (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225; cf also Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:430). Festinger himself formulated the following basic hypotheses for the theory:

* The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and to achieve consonance.
* When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase the dissonance.
* The presence of dissonance gives rise to pressures to eliminate the dissonance. The strength of the pressures to reduce the dissonance is a function of the magnitude of the dissonance (Festinger 1957:18, quoted in Sargent & Williamson 1966:225).

Freedman, Sears and Carlsmith (1978:430) distinguish three major ways to reduce dissonance: first, by *reducing the importance* of the dissonant elements; second, by *adding consonant elements*; and third, by *changing* one of the dissonant elements so that it *becomes consistent* with the others.

A high level of dissonance is generated when a person puts a great amount of energy into a commitment or decision, and his expectations about its effects are disappointed (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:434). The dissonance aroused by *disconfirmed expectations* can be reduced in various ways (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:435), one of which is to confirm the correctness of the original belief, while conceding that the disconfirmed expectations were incorrect. This reaction was perceived by Festinger, Reicken & Schachter (1956) in their study of a group who predicted the end of the world, while they expected to be saved by a spaceship. Instead of giving up their belief and returning to normal life (which action would not have reduced the dissonance caused by all the energy expended in their planning), they decided that the day had been postponed, but the end of the world was coming soon. They also changed their style dramatically - instead of being reserved and avoiding publicity, they suddenly started recruiting new

members. This gain in the number of members would presumably reduce their dissonance by showing that their original beliefs were correct, because more and more people were accepting them (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:435). (For a concise and informative discussion of all aspects of the cognitive dissonance theory, see Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:426-461. For reservations on the experiments and findings based on the theory, see Rosenberg 1965.)

Gager (1975:20-40; cf also Gottwald 1982:145) employed the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain why an apocalyptic-prophetic group 'whose theory (myth) ceases to fit the observable facts' (Edwards 1983:434) may consequently cease to exist, but may also 'intensify its fervor and translate its energy into an expanded missionary movement' (Osiek 1984:41-42). Gager postulates both Jesus' crucifixion and the delay of the parousia as instances of 'disconfirmation', causing a sense of cognitive dissonance which resulted in 'the intellectual response of reassessment and reinterpretation..., and the social response of proselytism or mission activity...' (Osiek 1984:42; cf Scroggs 1980:173 for the conditions that are required if pro-selytizing is to occur following disconfirmation).

The most serious charge against Gager's *Kingdom and Community* (1975) is brought in by Smith (1978:123), and it concerns what he calls 'the imprecision of Gager's aims'. According to Smith (1978:123-4) this work's subtitle, *The social world of early Christianity*, consists of two parts, namely the phrases 'social world' and 'early Christianity'. The first of these signals theory and methodology (cf Smith 1975:21 for definitions of 'social world'), and the last is a matter of 'domain', that is the phenomenon that is being studied. Any social world in its concrete expression at basic level as a community must, according to Smith (1978:124), exist in some place at a certain time - it cannot remain in the abstract. Using the terms 'world-construction' and 'world-maintenance' as defined within the sociology of knowledge by Berger & Luckmann (1967), Gager displays a processual understanding of social world. Yet he fails to achieve concreteness, to arrive at that world he believes the early Christians to be creating (Smith 1978:125). This fact gave rise to the title of Smith's review article: *Too much kingdom, too little community* - a play on Gager's own title (cf Smith 1978:123). Smith (1978:125) accuses Gager of adopting 'an all too easy functionalism' when being at all sociological, and claims that he is not really concerned with social construction, the analysis of symbolic worlds or asking social questions (Smith 1978:129). Smith's verdict (1978:124) on Gager's theoretical pretensions is: '...this book must be judged a noble failure....'

Other criticisms of Gager's approach are mainly directed at his assumption that early Christianity can be interpreted by reverting to comparisons with the mille-narian movements (cf Best 1983:189), or that the continuing existence of Christia-

nity, despite its beliefs and hopes and expectations being unfulfilled, can be explained by reference to the psychoanalytic phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. Malina, particularly, has taken up this issue, and is very critical of Gager: '...to employ a model from contemporary U.S. experience, such as Festinger's cognitive dissonance model, to directly explain something in the Mediterranean world, and the first century Mediterranean at that, seems highly suspect (I find this to be the case with nearly all of the explicit models used by Gager, 1975 ...)' (Malina 1986c:38; see also Malina 1982:240, and note 20 on the same page, for additional biblio-graphic references for a so-called 'balanced approach to the model'). Also, the theory of cognitive dissonance cannot adequately explain the *confirming* propensities of Jesus' resurrection (Osiek 1984:42-43; cf Tracy 1978:133). While Gager ascribes the survival of the early Christian groups to their overcoming their sense of cognitive dissonance, Malina (1986c:39) proposes exactly the opposite:

> Rather than any attempt to solve the cognitive dissonance resulting from the disconfirmation of its belief system, I will argue that it was the dissonance itself along with the normative inconsistencies typical of early Christian movement groups that best accounts for the survival and growth of these groups....[I]n the social setting of earliest Chris-tianity, normative inconsistency was the rule.

It is clear that Gager has fewer followers than critics on the issues discussed above. It is equally clear, though, that Gager's major work, *Kingdom and Community*, exhibits the same pioneering spirit that is found in Theissen, and for that Gager should receive credit.

### 3.3 Wayne A Meeks

Even before Theissen and Gager started writing in earnest on the subject of the social-scientific study of the New Testament, Meeks (1972) wrote an article - *The man from heaven in Johannine sectarianism* - in which he utilized concepts and theories from the sociology of knowledge to explain the reason for the creation of the motif of the Johannine descending/ascending redeemer. Meeks (1972:41) maintains that the Gospel of John was actually *intended* to be incomprehensible to outsiders, because it was meant to provide 'a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society' (Meeks 1972:70). It had its origin in the social context of the Johannine community. Berger (1977:230) criticized this notion of 'insiders', saying: 'Die "outsiders" des JohEv und der einzige "insider", Jesus, sind in dieser Position nur literarisch gesehen'. Still,

even at that early stage Meeks had shown 'the immense possibilities in this approach' (Scroggs 1980:176).

Several years later, Meeks (1983) designated his major work on the subject of social aspects in the New Testament a *social description* or *social history* of Pauline Christianity (Meeks 1983:2; see also Gottwald 1982:144; Harris 1984:108). He defined his task in a double sense: '...to the limit that the sources and our abilities permit, we must try to discern the texture of life in particular times and particular places. After that, the task of the social historian of early Christianity is to describe the life of the ordinary Christian within that environment - not just the ideas or the self-understanding of the leaders and writers' (Meeks 1983:2). The work seems to be more complex than a mere description, however, because Meeks (1983:2-7) has shown himself to be quite aware of the problems surrounding the interpretation of historical texts. In his words:

> In writing social history, then, we cannot afford to ignore the theories that guide social scientists. But which of the competing schools of sociology or anthropology or social psychology shall we heed? At what level of our inquiry and on what scale are theoretical proposals useful? To what degree of overall coherence can we reasonably aspire, without endangering our appreciation of our object's stubborn particularity? There is no comprehensive theory of social movements so commanding that we would be prudent to commit our method to its care. Even if there were, we should be suspicious of it. Christianity, even at the earliest moment we can get any clear picture of it, was already a complex movement taking form within several complex societies. What social theory is adequate to grasp the whole?

> (Meeks 1983:5)

Defining his approach as *interpretive description*, Meeks (1983:6) sketches his application of social science as 'eclectic', and his use of theory to be 'piecemeal, as needed, when it fits'. Having said this, Meeks (1983:6) nonetheless speaks about a 'family of perspectives shared by a growing number of social scientists and historians of religion' to which he also subscribes. According to this perspective 'society is viewed as a process, in which personal identity and social forms are mutually and continuously created by interactions that occur by means of symbols' (Meeks 1983:6). Meeks (1983:7) refers to his own position as that of a 'moderate functionalist' within this approach, and then again regards himself as 'adopting a func-

tionalist perspective in this moderate form' (1983:7), by which he hopes to avoid being reductionistic.

In a comprehensive and detailed review of Meeks's *The first urban Christians*, Elliott expresses surprise at the fact that Meeks does not explicate his theoretical presuppositions, and states (cf also Gottwald 1982:144; Tiryakian 1985:1139; Rohrbaugh 1987:110-113, 117-118 notes 24,25,27,30): 'Meeks, it would appear, would like to have it both ways - the safety of theory-free social description and the occasional dalliance with sociological research...

> Meeks...is reluctant to explicate his sociological theory and models and to spell out more adequately the implications of his moderate functionalist perspective on the Pauline social world. Consequently, it is often unclear *how* his 'piecemeal theory' informs and shapes his conclusions and how these conclusions are to be evaluated.

> (Elliott 1985:332-334)

Tiryakian (1985:1139) confesses to having an 'impression of conceptual fragmentation rather than of a unified piece' after reading Meeks's work. Schöllgen (1988) criticises Meeks on several points (not all of which are valid to my mind), the most important of which are: too little information to build valid conclusions on, and: transforming possibilities into certainties. Schöllgen (1988:75) formulates:

> Der methodische Fehler von Meeks, der sich der Schwächen vieler seiner Einzelargumente durchaus bewusst ist, liegt in der Annahme, dass viele nur mögliche Interpretationen im Sinne einer Konvergenz-argumentation zusammengezogen die höheren Weihen der Wahr-scheinlichkeit erhalten.

Whether Meeks intentionally sought to 'have it both ways' or not is unsure, but he seems to have succeeded where Theissen failed, and that is to get a hearing with the more conservative theologians, if Kümmel (1985:359) can be regarded as their spokesman: '...im ganzen sind M.s Ausführungen überzeugend und weiterführend....'

On average, and despite the criticism, Meeks's work has been well received, described as 'the best single volume on the Pauline social world' (Elliott 1985:333) at the time and a 'balanced use of historical-critical and sociological-anthropological methods and theories' (Harris 1984:110).

### 3.4 Bruce J Malina

While, in the above discussion on Theissen, Gager and Meeks, criticism has been voiced concerning the lack of explication of their theory and the models they use, the same could not be said about Malina. He has written extensively, and has always been at pains to explicate both theory and model. Malina has also done some invaluable work towards making the complex realm of social-scientific theory and models accessible to the interested reader by writing clearly and concisely on the subject (cf Malina 1982:229-242; 1983:119-133 for short introductions to his work; cf 1986a, especially pages 1-27, for a comprehensive explication and application of 'practical models for biblical interpretation').

An important observation by Malina (1982:237) on the use of models is the following:

> ...human beings generate models in order to understand their expe-
> riences. No model that we know of is useful for every conceivable
> purpose. There is no model to help understand all models, just as
> there is no language that one could learn to be able to understand all
> languages. The use of models is like the use of tools; in this sense
> models are question-specific or area-specific constructs. The appro-
> priate model depends on the type of information one seeks to gene-
> rate and comprehend.

While this is true in general, it is also true of specific and controlled efforts to interpret human society or some aspect of it. A 'social system', according to Malina (1982:232), is actually a sort of model intrinsic to any human group. Its function is to provide 'categories of human experience and behavior that serve to help understand, control, and predict the flow of human interaction'. Therefore, any effort to understand or interpret human behaviour is based on some model of how the system works, and this is true whether it is acknowledged (explicit models) or not (implicit models) (cf Carney 1975:5; Malina 1982:232; Elliott 1986:6).

It is characteristic of the social sciences to use the models - whether sociological, anthropological, political, economic, educational, religious, cross-cultural or psychological (Malina 1982:232) - to examine human interaction in terms of what is typical and recurrent. This poses a problem when social systems are to be interpreted that are not available for observation, such as those of the early Christian groups. These groups are presented to us as part of the content of literary texts, whose main character is *not* simply descriptive, but ideological. In other words, the author would employ only such information (possibly of interest to the social

sciences) as would be instrumental to his ideological point of view and purpose. In addition, the information would be in the guise of a way of expression peculiar to the author, and therefore incidental. This means that another set of models is needed besides those used to interpret the functioning of human social systems, and that would be models 'of the nature and function of language (linguistics)' (Malina 1982:232).

Another factor that has to be considered is the *historical* issue. The societies we wish to study are ancient, historical societies. They are not present to be observed and compared with other societies. They are contained in texts (units of meaning) from the past (cf Malina 1982:233). Because of the 'distance', in more than one sense, of those societies from our own, the meanings that prevailed in them would of necessity be alien to us. History, as a model for the interpretation of such alien meaning, 'seeks to explain events in terms of the distinctiveness of agents and agencies, in terms of particularities and differences. The other social sciences, rooted in the present, prescind from the past for the most part to seek out generalities, commonalities, samenesses' (Malina 1982:233). The problem is that 'in order to ferret out distinctiveness all the commonalities of the area under study have to be known and articulated' (Malina 1982:233). Therefore, models of the social science sort need to be combined with models of the history sort and models of the linguistic sort to interpret (biblical) texts from the past (Malina 1982:233).

Malina (1982:233) distinguishes 'three main types of social science models that one might use to understand social interaction', namely the structural functionalist model, the conflict model, and the symbolic model. Elliott (1986:7; see also note 13 on the same page) prefers to designate these and other styles of theorizing as 'theoretical perspectives' rather than 'models'.

The model (perspective) of *structural functionalism* presupposes that society is in equilibrium, and 'is a relatively persistent, stable, well-integrated structure of elements' (Malina 1982:234; see also Malina 1986c:40,43-44). According to this view, all the elements in society function towards the maintenance of society as a whole, integral system (Malina 1982:234). Adaptive change may occur over time, but non-adaptive change is regarded as deviance (cf Malina 1982:234). This model is useful for determining typical structures and patterns of behaviour within a society. Malina (1982:234 note 12) cites works by the following authors as examples of structural functionalist approaches to biblical texts: Gottwald (1979); Malina (1981a); Wilson (1980).

Another, and different, type of model (perspective) is that of *conflict theory*, also known as the *coercion, power* or *interest model* (Malina 1982:234; 1986c:42-44). This type of model presupposes that society and the elements of society are constantly

changing, unless some force intervenes to prohibit the change. Malina (1982:235) states: 'From this perspective and in terms of this sort of model, a good way to understand biblical texts is to find out what elements or factors interfere with the normal process of change....Social change, deviance, is normal'. Gager's *Kingdom and community* (1975) is cited as an example of the application of the conflict model (Malina 1982:235, note 13).

The third main type of social science perspective focuses on the *symbolic* character of human interaction. Other than the structural functionalist and conflict models, the symbolic model does not presuppose 'that a social system is a group of interacting persons whose interactions are structured and oriented around common purposes' (Malina 1982:235). According to this approach a social system is regarded as a 'system of symbols, that is, meanings, values and feelings about the meanings and values that are attached to and embodied by persons, things, and events' (Malina 1982:235). The presupposition of this model is that individual and collective human behavior is organized around the symbolic meanings and expectations attached to objects that are socially valued (Malina 1982:236). Biblical interpreters could use this model to establish what roles, symbols, gestures, and definitions of situations are expressed or implied in the texts (cf Malina 1982:236). Some examples of the symbolic approach can be found in Feeley-Harnik (1981); Malina (1981b); Pilch (1981) (cf Malina 1982:236, note 14). (For examples of how these different perspectives have been applied to the same text, see Malina 1988b; Pilch 1988; Neyrey 1988).

Malina (1982:241; see also 1983:129-131) distinguishes five features that should characterize a good social science model for biblical interpretation.

> Minimally, the model should have the following features: (1) it should be a cross-cultural model, accounting for the interpreter as well as those interpreted in some comparative perspective; (2) it should be of a sufficient level of abstraction to allow for the surfacing of simi-larities that facilitates comparison; (3) the model should be able to fit a larger sociolinguistic frame for interpreting texts; (4) it should derive from experiences that match what we know of the time and place conditioned biblical world as closely as possible; (5) the meanings it generates should be irrelevant but understandable to us and our twentieth century United States society; (6) the application of

> the model should be acceptable to social scientists (even if they
> disagree with the validity of the enterprise).

> (Malina 1982:241)

Malina himself uses different interpretive models, although he is essentially
committed to working from the perspective of cultural anthropology. Cultural
anthropology, according to Gottwald (1982:145), is 'essentially structural-functional
in character'. Gottwald (1982:155, note 14) cites Malina (1981b) as an example of a
structural-functionalist approach. Malina (1982:236, note 14) himself, however,
cites the same work as an example of the symbolic approach. In the words of
Neyrey (1986:107) Malina, in his recent major work (1986a), succeeded in deve-
loping 'a single macro-model for the investigation of the New Testament, viz., the
cross-cultural model of British anthropologist Mary Douglas' (Neyrey 1986:107; for
a discussion on the definition and application of anthropology, see Malina 1986b:
150-151). An important benefit of the use of cross-cultural models is that it requires
the interpreter to constantly take note of, and account for, his/her own social
location, and so the use of such models should act as a deterrent for ethnocentric
interpretation (Malina 1982:238-239; see Malina 1989 for a model of different time
perceptions, and the importance of that for interpretation).

*Ethnocentricity* refers to the very common and universally found inclination of
any individual or group to interpret the properties and/or behavior of any 'alien'
individual and/or group in terms of the norms, values and characteristics of the own
group. The concept 'ethnocentrism' was introduced by William G Sumner, and
refers to a 'view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and
all others are scaled and rated with reference to it' (Sumner 1940:13). The values of
the own group, as the *in-group*, 'are equated with abstract, universal standards of
morality and the practices of the in-group are exalted as better or more "natural"
than those of any out-group' (Noel 1971:33). Catton (1964:930) summarizes the
essence of ethnocentrism as follows: 'Ethnocentrism makes us see out-group
behavior as deviation from in-group mores rather than as adherence to outgroup
mores'.

Deserving special mention is Malina's contribution in pointing out the
distinction of four basic social institutions or structures in any society - namely
kinship, economics, politics, and religion (Malina 1986b:152-153). I found a
correlate for this notion of Malina in a discussion by Gurvitch (1971:22-23) on types
and forms of knowledge. Gurvitch made the following important observation:

Certain types of knowledge, most particularly the perceptual know-
ledge of the external world, but also knowledge of the Other and the
We, groups, classes, etc., political knowledge, certain branches of
scientific knowledge arising from the natural sciences (astronomy,
physics, biology, etc.) or human sciences (including history and
sociology), involve the study of the specific space and time in which
their objects move.

He goes on to say that the different types of knowledge range themselves in an
*hierarchic* system as soon as it comes to social frameworks of major importance.
And then, more importantly, ' *...in this variable hierarchy the predominant type or
types penetrate all the others*'. He gives the following example: 'In Ancient Greece,
philosophical knowledge and perceptual knowledge of the external world, which
held first place, penetrated all the other types of knowledge...' (Gurvitch 1971:23) .
From these references it is clear that Malina's exposition on *basic social institutions*
is not a novel idea - it had its antecedents in sociology of knowledge's reflections on
*different types of knowledge* belonging to the *different frameworks of knowledge* within
a *specific time and place*.

As a general rule, one of these institutions maintains primacy over the others in
societal arrangements:

In Christendom in the past, and in Islamic republics in the present,
kinship, economics, and politics are embedded in religion, i.e., the
norms of kinship, economics, and politics are determined by the reli-
gious institution: representatives of the religious institution rule their
societies in one way or another.

(Malina 1986b:153)

Malina (1986b:153-154) goes on to cite examples where either kinship, economics or
politics maintained primacy and the other institutions were the embedded ones (cf
also Hollenbach 1985:153). The importance of this contribution lies in the fact that
it sensitizes the interpreter to the fact that the society being studied was configured
radically different from ours. The interpreter should therefore take extreme care
not to be ethnocentrically anachronistic.

### 3.5 John H Elliott

Elliott, even at a cursory reading, shows himself to have an excellent command of the theory and concepts of the social sciences, combining that with an informed way of perceiving and handling the texts. He is also the first of the authors under consideration to concentrate on the sociological interpretation of one single New Testament writing (Elliott 1981:7; see also Edwards 1983:442). (According to Elliott [1989], Fernando Belo [1975] was the first scholar to perform a social-scientific analysis of a single New Testament work, namely the Gospel of Mark.) In his major work, Elliott (1981:1) states the intention of his 'sociological exegesis' as being to complement and improve 'the prevailing method of biblical interpretation through more rigorous attention to the social dimension of the biblical text and to the sociological dimension of the exegetical task'. He defines 'sociological exegesis' as

> the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis (correlation) of (1) the literary, sociological and theological features and dimensions of the text (1 Peter) and (2) this text's relation to and impact upon its narrower and wider social contexts.

> (Elliott 1981:8)

Wire (1984:209) underscores Elliott's emphasis on the importance of the text: '...the text itself is the only witness to its specific situation....So it all comes back to literary analysis or what is more exactly called rhetorical analysis, searching the text for what Elliott calls the "strategy" of the writer, and through that finding the situation...in which this particular strategy makes sense'.

The term 'strategy' is of interest and of importance. Elliott (1981:10) defines the term as referring to the deliberate design of a document calculated to have a specific social effect on its intended hearers or readers. This has to do with the pragmatic dimension of the text, and includes aspects such as its goals, means, and intended function (Elliott 1987:2). Evidence of the strategy of a text can be found in its manner of description, emphasis, and evaluation of certain selected features; the way in which it *proscribes or criticises and/or prescribes or praises* certain actions, roles, institutions, attitudes, beliefs, et cetera, or *'explains, justifies, and legitimates'* these (Elliott 1987:2). The 'strategy' has to be related to the 'situation' of the text. *Situation*, according to Elliott (1987:1; his emphasis),

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...involves various levels and phases. The *macrosocial level of a text* concerns the macrosocial context of the text, the total social system in which the text is produced. *The microsocial level of a text* concerns the more specific social conditions and features of its specific sender(s) and receiver(s). The situation of a text can [be] viewed (a) *synchronically* (with attention to social patterns of behavior, institutions, structures, processes and their relations *at a given point or period in time*, or (b) *diachronically* (with attention to how these social features and arrangements *change over the course of time*).

This correlation between the *strategy* and the *situation* of a text in fact constitutes the integration of a literary and a social-scientific analysis of the text.

While a description of the strategy of a text is pursued by mainly *literary* methods, a description of the *situation* of a text is sought by mainly *social-scientific* methods. In an article on methods and models Elliott (1986:1-33) sketches a model of the process of making sense of things. A tree structure of this model would use the term 'paradigm' to designate broad, inclusive ways of looking at realities (such as the historical-critical paradigm of biblical exegesis) and at a second level the term 'theoretical perspectives' to designate structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, et cetera (cf Elliott 1986:7). According to these 'theoretical perspectives' specific models are employed to investigate, organize and explain social data (cf Elliott 1986:8).

### 3.6 Norman R Petersen

Petersen is the second author under consideration who undertook a social-scientific investigation of a single New Testament document, namely Paul's Letter to Philemon (Petersen 1985). Petersen's approach in this work could be appropriately described as an integration of the salient elements of three key fields - two of them taken from the social sciences (sociology and anthropology) and the other from literary theory (narratology) - into 'the traditional philological base of the historical critical method' (Petersen 1985:ix; cf Hays 1987:173; Osiek 1987:39; Darr 1988:118, and Wimbush 1988:121 for positive assessments of Petersen's accomplishment of this goal). Petersen (1985:ix) himself calls it a 'literary sociological method'. The terms used to describe the three fields of interest are already suggestive of Petersen's methodology: *literary theory* refers to the concepts *point of view*, *narrative world* (as opposed to *contextual world*), *plot*, and *closure*, which are all associated with narrative analysis; *social anthropology* refers inter alia to the concepts *institution*

and *social interaction*, which are associated with social scientific analysis; *sociology of knowledge* refers to the concept *symbolic universe*, which is associated with an analysis of belief systems.

Petersen (1985:171, note 2) remarks that the sociology of knowledge, as explicated by Berger & Luckmann (1967), provides the theoretical framework within which he reads the work of both field and armchair anthropologists. In an evaluation of the social-scientific side of Petersen's work the remark referred to should serve as a starting point, for it indicates that the sociology of knowledge provides the primary frame of reference according to which he assays the import of any data of social interest.

### 3.6.1  Sociology of knowledge

Elsewhere (Van Staden 1988:340-345) I have made a condensed survey of the sociology of knowledge and its key concepts (as explicated by Berger & Luckmann 1967) while attesting to its usefulness for the interpretation of biblical texts (see Scroggs 1980:175; De Villiers 1984:66; Lategan 1984:10 for similarly positive evaluations). Petersen utilizes several of these concepts in the construction and application of his model - concepts such as *role, resocialization, legitimation, universe-maintenance, social institutions,* and *symbolic universe.*

One of the major premises of the sociology of knowledge is that all thought is inextricably linked to its delineation by the contemporary historical situation and locality (Klaus Berger 1977:240). Therefore Berger & Luckmann (1967:4) see the central problem of the sociology of knowledge as establishing 'the existential determination *(Seinsgebundenheit)* of thought as such'.

According to Berger & Luckmann (1967:5) this is a general problem that arises when specific factors such as the historical, psychological, biological, economical or sociological, are seen as determinative of human thought. The postulate that social reality is created by man, and that man in turn is shaped by that reality, has led to the seemingly paradoxical statement of the sociology of knowledge that society is a product of man (Berger & Luckmann 1967:1, 3, 15), and man is a product of society (Berger 1973:13-14). This observation, that man and society reciprocally define one another, is of fundamental importance for the exegesis of New Testament texts - it redirects our attention to the fact that time is a capturing device, both for the historically 'encapsulated' society that we study through its literary products, and for the 'encapsulated' society into which we find ourselves absorbed. In essence this means that whilst the relationship between man and society has some universal traits, it also differs substantially between one time and place and others. Malina (1982:241) is no doubt correct when he states that the meanings generated by a

social-scientific model for the 'time and place' conditioned biblical world should be irrelevant but understandable to us in twentieth-century society.

Other definitions that describe the general significance of the sociology of knowledge are the following, taken from Gould & Kolb's (1964:679), *A dictionary of the social sciences*:

- 'The proper theme of our study is to observe how and in what form intellectual life at a given historical moment is related to the existing social and political forces' (Mannheim 1952:237-260).
- 'Sociology of knowledge is the analysis of the functional interrelations of social processes and structures on the one hand and the patterns of intellectual life, including the modes of knowing, on the other' (Becker & Dahlke 1941:310).
- 'The sociology of knowledge...is concerned with the way in which systems of thought...are conditioned by other social facts (Sprott 1954:141).

It is clear from a reading of Petersen's (1985) work that the *social-scientific* part of his interpretive model is based on his literary insight. In a discussion and evaluation of the social-scientific elements of his approach the key literary elements would therefore have to be referred to again.

Probably the most important one of these literary elements for Petersen, is the concept of the *referential history*, or the *narrative world* of a narrative discourse. Petersen, following Eco (1979), understands the concept to refer to the world as it is represented in the text, and that world represents the referential function of messages as explicated by Roman Jakobson (Petersen 1985:33, note 3; 1978:9-48). Defining the concept, Petersen (1985:33, note 3) states: 'the world of a narrative is a literary construction, and the events which take place in that world have a narrative quality'. Elsewhere he formulates as follows: 'The narrative world is that reality which a narrator bestows upon his actors and upon their actions....' (Petersen 1985:7). This literary-theoretical statement provides the link between the literary and social-scientific endeavours. According to Petersen (1985:ix) ' "worlds" are human constructions, whether they are the constructions of societies or of narrators, and...narrative worlds are comprised of the same kinds of social facts - symbolic forms and social arrangements - as socalled real worlds'. In this way the literary concept of *narrative worlds* becomes accessible to social science analysis.

The link-up in Petersen's approach, between the literary concept of the narrative world as a *constructed world*, and the sociology of knowledge's presentation of social reality as a *constructed reality*, seems almost inevitable. Petersen (1985:17-22, especially 20-21) argues consistently from the premise that narrative worlds and

social reality are somehow akin in terms of construction and operation. Both these kinds of 'worlds' are analyzed in terms of two social-scientific categories, namely *social arrangement* and *symbolic form*, which constitute what are known as *social facts* (see Petersen 1985:38, note 49; 40, note 66 for a brief discussion, and biblio- graphical references, on the subject of social facts). Petersen (1985:x) gives the following definitions of these two categories (Petersen 1985:39, note 49 acknow- ledges his indebtedness to the work of Berger & Luckmann 1967 for the use of these categories.):

> 'Social arrangements' have to do with the social structures underlying the social relations comprised by the actions of the actors....'Symbolic forms', on the other hand, have to do with the overarching cognitive systems, the systems of knowledge, belief, and value, that define these actors' identities and motivate their actions.

Social arrangements, therefore, have to do with the social institutions one encounters in everyday life, institutions within the fields of economics, politics, religion and kinship. It has to do with the social relations enacted by the actors who represent these institutions. All these elements make up the fabric of what is known as the *social universe* (Petersen 1985:27-28) or *institutional order*. This order, however, is a segmented one, precisely by virtue of its institutionality. The discrete institutional processes need to be integrated into a comprehensive meaningful system. This is done by the *symbolic universe*, which is an all-embracing frame of reference that provides an integrative meaning for a society that consists of segmented institutions and diverse subjective experiences (cf Van Staden 1988:349, summarizing Berger & Luckmann). Petersen (1985:57) defines a symbolic universe as a body of traditional knowledge known through language and symbol, a system of meanings that defines and thereby creates a 'world'. It shapes and legitimates social institutions (cf Darr 1988:120). The *social universe*, according to Petersen (1985:27-28), is inhabited by both believers and non-believers, while God and Christ are absent from the social universe but present in the symbolic universe. They are present in the social universe only as objects of knowledge. Therefore Petersen makes a distinction between *theology* and *symbolic universe* as representing two different kinds of knowledge. He states:

> Theology...is...a kind of knowledge that is the product of systematic reflection upon a symbolic universe, and indeed of reflection that serves to maintain that universe when it is in some kind of jeopardy,

as for example from the threats of doubt, of disagreement, or of com-
peting symbolic universes. Theology is...a kind of knowledge that is
produced to defend and maintain the knowledge comprising a symbo-
lic universe, and for this reason we can speak of a symbolic universe
as a primary (pre-reflective) form of knowledge and theology as a
secondary (reflective) form that is dependent on it.

(Petersen 1985:29-30)

According to Hays (1987:173) the second chapter of Petersen's *Rediscovering Paul*,
which scrutinizes the social structures and arrangements depicted in the narrative
world, is 'the real heart of Petersen's work', offering the greatest advances in our
understanding of Paul.

However, Hays (1987:174) is critical of Petersen's distinction between 'symbolic
universe' and 'theology'. He describes Petersen's survey of Paul's symbolic universe
as 'looking very much like a summary of Pauline theology under the unifying themes
of kinship and master-slave relations'. He is also doubtful whether the social-
anthropological categories allow Petersen to adequately display the *narrative*
structure of Paul's 'symbolic universe'.

### 3.6.2    Using social anthropology

To study these institutions and the social relations as presented in the narrative,
Petersen employs the discipline of *social anthropology*, a subfield of the social
science 'anthropology'. He consciously chooses to use social anthropology, because
it accomplishes what sociology cannot - namely it accounts for the category of
*symbolic forms* and its relation to *social arrangements* (cf Petersen 1985:18).

The relationship between the worlds explored by anthropologists and the
narrative worlds consists mainly in both being 'closed systems' (see Petersen
1985:40, note 61 and 63, for bibliographic references on this subject). This means
that 'when and as such worlds are experienced, they comprise an internally ordered
whole which is the ultimate object of interest, for it is the frame of reference in
which the parts make sense' (Petersen 1985:20). The reader of a narrative and the
anthropologist are also alike inasmuch as they are both 'participant observers in
other worlds' (Petersen 1985:20).

According to the exposition by Petersen the three fields, namely narrative
criticism, sociology of knowledge, and social anthropology, are compatible enough
for them to be incorporated into a model with which to study the narrative world of
a New Testament narrative discourse. The primary factor promoting compatibility

is the fact that all three of these fields apply to the study of 'worlds' - narrative worlds, social worlds and symbolic universes. Another link between the literary and social aspects of Petersen's work was noted by Darr (1988:120): 'Conspicuously absent from the field of view afforded by Petersen's literary lens is the element of characterization. This is hardly coincidental, for it is precisely at this point that the literary and the social are merged....That is, he treats the characters of Paul's story solely in sociological terms'.

Finally, the *sociology of knowledge* has a relative independence within the discipline of sociology in the sense of formulating its own epistemology for the purpose of providing an explanation for the coming about and persistence of every-day social reality. At the same time, the sociology of knowledge's understanding of social reality, as advocated by Berger & Luckmann, to my mind bears a close resemblance to *structural functionalism*, one of the main perspectives on the functioning of society distinguished within the social sciences (cf Turner 1982:19-116).

## 4.  CONCLUSION

This survey of recent scholarship was intended to be more descriptive than evaluative, although some evaluation is unavoidable and perhaps desirable. Broadly speaking, there are three major conclusions to be drawn from the survey:

- A definite distinction should be maintained between approaches concentrating on constructing a *social history* from and for the text, and approaches that wish to analyse the text by means of the methods and models developed in the *social sciences*.
- Both in the case of *descriptive* studies (or studies with the purpose of constructing a *social history* of early Christianity) and in the case of explanatory or interpretive studies constituting a *social-scientific* analysis of the social forces and institutions of early Christianity (cf Elliott 1981:6-7), one should be especially aware of the danger of the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. This fallacy refers to the illegitimate application of the presumed meaning of a term or syntactical unit in antiquity to present-day problems. A case in point relating to a descriptive study is Stegemann's explication of the meaning of the term 'poor' in the New Testament and, based on that explication, his solution for treating the present-day poor (Stegemann 1984:54-64, 72-73 notes 68-77). It is also possible that even interpretive social-scientific studies could reflect the same fallacy, inasmuch as they make no distinction between the *narrative world* and the *contextual world* of a text, or between the *situation* and the *strategy* of a

text.

■ Finally, it has become clear that scholars in this field allocate differing levels of importance to the composition of the narrative text. In the case of Theissen it seems that meanings conferred on the material by a creative author were completely ignored. Meeks and Malina made more of the text, but it was Elliott and Petersen who proposed that the text should be treated in literary as well as in social-scientific terms. This is in agreement with my own assessment of the import of both these directional approaches.

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