Modelling Early Christianity

Social-scientific studies of the New Testament in its context

Edited by
Philip F. Esler

Also available as a printed book see title verso for ISBN details
Modelling Early Christianity explores the intriguing and foreign social context of first-century Palestine and the Graeco-Roman East, in which the Christian faith was first proclaimed and the New Testament documents were written. It demonstrates that a sophisticated analysis of the context is essential in order to understand the original meaning of the texts.

This study employs a wide variety of models drawn from anthropology, sociology, social psychology and other social sciences to pose fresh agendas for investigating the New Testament in its context. The contributors examine themes central to this new approach: the fundamental economic, social and religious features of the Mediterranean world; phenomena relating to the formation and maintenance of early Christian groups; the centrality of notions of kinship and honour in understanding a range of material from Paul, Matthew and Luke; the impact of the ideology of war on the New Testament and Jewish texts roughly contemporary with it. They offer a wealth of novel and socially realistic interpretations which make sense of the texts.

At the same time, Modelling Early Christianity contains significant new ideas on the relationship between social-scientific and literary-critical analysis, the theoretical justification for model-use, and the way these new approaches can fertilize contemporary Christian theology.


Philip F.Esler is Dean of Divinity and Professor of Biblical Criticism at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. He is the author of The First Christians in their Social Worlds (Routledge 1994).
MODELLING EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Social-scientific studies of the New Testament in its context

Edited by Philip F. Esler
To James Esler SM

ipse tamquam imbres mittet eloquia sapientiae suae et in oratione confitebitur Domino.
| Illustrations                                      | viii   |
| Contributors                                      | ix     |
| Preface                                           | xi     |
| Abbreviations                                    | xii    |

INTRODUCTION Models, context and kerygma in New Testament interpretation
*Philip F. Esler*

**Part I  The world of first-century Palestine**

1. HERODIAN ECONOMICS IN GALILEE Searching for a suitable model
   *Sean Freyne*
   
2. THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS An experience of alternate reality
   *John J. Pilch*
   
3. THE EVIL EYE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
   *J. Duncan M. Derrett*
   
**Part II  Early Christian group formation and maintenance**

4. THE JEWISH MESSIANIC MOVEMENT From faction to sect
   *John H. Elliott*
   
5. EARLY CHRISTIAN GROUPS Using small group formation theory to explain Christian organizations
   *Bruce J. Malina*
   
6. DEVIANCE AND APOSTASY Some applications of deviance theory to first-century Judaism and Christianity
   *John M. G. Barclay*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part III Family and honour in Matthew and Luke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 LOSS OF WEALTH, LOSS OF FAMILY AND LOSS OF HONOUR The cultural context of the original makarisms in Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome H. Neyrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 THE MATTHEAN BROTHERHOOD AND MARGINAL SCRIBAL LEADERSHIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis C. Duling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard L. Rohrbaugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 WOMEN AND MEN AT HELLENISTIC SYMPOSIA MEALS IN LUKE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart L. Love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part IV Paul, kinship and ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 MANAGING THE HOUSEHOLD Paul as paterfamilias of the Christian household group in Corinth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephan J. Joubert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGICAL IDEOLOGY IN PAULINE CHRISTIANITY A structuration theory perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David G. Horrell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part V Oppression, war and peace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 GOD’S HONOUR AND ROME’S TRIUMPH Responses to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE in three Jewish apocalypses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip F. Esler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 THE LANGUAGE OF WARFARE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raymond Hobbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM AND LITERARY STUDIES Prospects for cooperation in biblical interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernon K. Robbins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of ancient sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of modern authors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ILLUSTRATIONS

The following illustrations of the Flavian Iudaea Capta coins appearing on pp. 249–254 were prepared by Miss Teresa Rickards from the originals in the British Museum. The particular coins are identified by reference to the Plates in Mattingly 1930 or Hill 1914. Copyright of the drawings is held by the University of St Andrews (School of Divinity).

1  Aureus minted at Lugdunum in 72 GE
2  Aureus minted at Rome in 69–70 CE
3  As minted at Rome in 77–78 CE
4  Denarius minted at Rome in 69–70 CE
5  Denarius minted at Lugdunum
6  Denarius (hybrid type)
7  Sestertius minted at Rome in 71 CE
8  Sestertius minted at Rome in 72 CE
9  Sestertius minted at Rome in 72–73 CE
10 Sestertius minted at Rome in 71 CE
11 Aureus minted at Lugdunum
12 Aureus minted at Rome in 77–78 CE
13 Sestertius minted at Rome in 71 CE
14 Bronze coin minted in Palestine in early Flavian era
CONTRIBUTORS

John M.G.Barclay is a Lecturer in the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Glasgow, Scotland.


Dennis C.Duling is Professor of New Testament, Canisius College, Buffalo, New York, USA.

John H.Elliott is Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco, USA.

Philip F.Esler is Dean of Divinity and Professor of Biblical Criticism, University of St Andrews, Scotland.

Sean Freyne is Professor of Theology, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

Raymond Hobbs is Professor of Old Testament Interpretation, McMaster Divinity College, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada.


Stephan J.Joubert is Professor in the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Stuart L.Love is Professor of New Testament, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, USA.

Bruce J.Malina is Professor in the Department of Theology, Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, USA.

Jerome H.Neyrey is Professor of New Testament, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

John J.Pilch is visiting Associate Professor of Biblical Literature, Department of Theology, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA.

Vernon K.Robbins is Professor of New Testament in the Department and Graduate Division of Religion, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

Richard L.Rohrbaugh is Professor of Religion, Lewis and Glark College, Portland, Oregon, USA.
Nicholas H. Taylor is Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni, Swaziland.
The essays in this volume are revised versions of papers presented at *Context and Kerygma: The St Andrews Conference on New Testament Interpretation and the Social Sciences* held in St Andrews from 29 June to 3 July 1994. A number of those who attended are members of the (largely US) Context Group: Project on the Study of the Bible in its Cultural Environment, and there were further participants from Scotland, England, Ireland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and South Africa.

The usual *modus operandi* of the Context Group (on which see Esler 1993b), consisting of collegial yet forthright discussion of papers to assist their authors prepare them for publication, was adopted at this Conference and, as a result, most of the essays have been modified to take into account views expressed by a particular nominated respondent or in discussion following their delivery. So although the reproduction of these views themselves would not have been possible here, they flavour the essays which follow.

I am grateful to my colleagues Dr R.A.Piper, the Principal of St Marys, and Professor R.Bauckham for the help they gave me before and during the Conference. I am also particularly indebted to Ms Helen-Ann Francis, a Senior Honours student in the School of Divinity at St Andrews, for having been a cheerful and efficient administrative assistant during the course of the Conference and also for the long hours she spent in helping to get the manuscript ready for submission to the publisher, especially in the preparation of the composite List of References and Indices, and in proof-reading. Mr Scott Hastings, a postgraduate student at St Andrews, also assisted with proof-reading.

The Routledge staff, especially Mr Richard Stoneman, have encouraged this project from its inception and have seen to the publication of the manuscript with their usual professionalism and good humour.

The dedication to my cousin Fr James Esler SM, of Sydney, Australia, represents a small acknowledgement of a much older debt.

Philip F. Esler
St Andrews
1 May 1995
ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABD</td>
<td>D.N. Freedman (ed.) <em>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AnBib</td>
<td><em>Analecta biblica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANRW</td>
<td><em>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td><em>Biblical Archaeologist</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAGD</td>
<td>W. Bauer <em>et al.: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASOR</td>
<td><em>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBB</td>
<td><em>Bonner biblische Beiträge</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEvT</td>
<td><em>Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td><em>Biblica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR</td>
<td><em>Biblical Research</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td><em>Biblical Theology Bulletin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZ</td>
<td><em>Biblische Zeitschrift</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td><em>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConBNT</td>
<td><em>Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRINT</td>
<td><em>Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad novum testamentum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CurTM</td>
<td><em>Currents in Theology and Mission</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETL</td>
<td><em>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETS</td>
<td><em>Erfurter theologische Studien</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ExpTim</td>
<td><em>Expository Times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRLANT</td>
<td><em>Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDR</td>
<td><em>Harvard Dissertations in Religion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td><em>History of Religions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTR</td>
<td><em>Harvard Theological Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTS</td>
<td><em>Harvard Theological Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td><em>International Critical Commentary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEJ</td>
<td>Israel Exploration Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRT</td>
<td>Issues in Religion and Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. A.</td>
<td>Josephus: Jewish Antiquities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAAR</td>
<td>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAC</td>
<td>Jahrbuch Jüdische Antike und Christentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJS</td>
<td>Journal of Jewish Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JQR</td>
<td>Jewish Quarterly Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JR</td>
<td>Journal of Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRA</td>
<td>Journal of Roman Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRH</td>
<td>Journal of Religious History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRS</td>
<td>Journal of Roman Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSNT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSNTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>Jewish Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSSR</td>
<td>Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td>Journal of Theological Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. W.</td>
<td>Josephus: Jewish War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neot</td>
<td>Neotestamentica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJBC</td>
<td>R.E. Brown et al. (eds) The New Jerome Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NovT</td>
<td>Novum Testamentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NovTSup</td>
<td>Novum Testamentum, Supplements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTS</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBT</td>
<td>Overtures to Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEQ</td>
<td>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Migne’s Patrologia Graecae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PW</td>
<td>Pauly-Wissowa, Real-encyclopaedia der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSR</td>
<td>Recherches de science religieuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>SBL Dissertation Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLMS</td>
<td>SBL Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLSP</td>
<td>SBL Seminar Papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Stuttgarter Bibelstudien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBT</td>
<td>Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJLA</td>
<td>Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNTSMS</td>
<td>Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDNT</td>
<td>G.Kittel and G.Friedrich (eds) <em>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td><em>Theological Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TToday</td>
<td><em>Theology Today</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWNT</td>
<td>G.Kittel and G.Friedrich (eds) <em>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td><em>Vetus Testamentum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZNW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZTK</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION
Models, context and kerygma in New Testament interpretation

Philip F. Esler

EMMAUS

In one of the most distinctive incidents in his Gospel, Luke relates how two disciples who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, although without recognizing him, invited him to stay with them overnight and discovered their evening meal took an unexpected course:

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?’

(Luke 24:30–32; RSV)

Since the time of Aristotle, literary theorists have referred to an incident such as this as a ‘recognition’ (anagnorisis), meaning a change from ignorance to knowledge, in this case leading not to tragedy (as when Oedipus discovers that he has killed his father and married his mother) but to good fortune and enlightenment.¹ There are parallels to this account in Graeco-Roman literature, as in Plutarch’s description of how Romulus, after his death, appeared to a friend on a road outside Rome, told him he was the god Quirinus and vanished.² Yet to appreciate how Luke has employed this literary topos and to establish the bearing which the Emmaus incident has upon the nature of New Testament interpretation, we need to consider its setting within the entirety of Luke 24:13–35.

The evangelist has developed his narrative through a series of four possible moments during which the recognition might occur: first, in the initial meeting on the road, when he expressly says that the disciples did not recognize Jesus; secondly, while one of the two disciples, in answer to Jesus’ question, ‘What matters are you discussing as you walk along?’, describes what has just happened in Jerusalem; thirdly, when Jesus rebukes them for their dejection and explains from scriptures why it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and enter his
glory; and, fourthly, during the meal. The disciples observe later that their hearts burned within them as Jesus talked to them on the road (24:32), yet no recognition accompanied such excitement at the time, if indeed they did experience it.

These four moments mark off stages in the deepening social interaction between Jesus and the disciples which climaxes in one of the most integrative occasions between unrelated males in first-century culture—a meal. It is only at this final stage that the stranger sitting at the table reveals his identity. Only in a paradigmatic ceremony of social harmony in the Mediterranean world of the time, the breaking of bread, does God’s power in the world become apparent. But the epiphany is short lived, since Jesus promptly vanishes. Nor does the story end there. For its closure only comes when the two disciples, having returned to Jerusalem, relate to the others ‘what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread’ (24:35). The explanation offered refers not only to the revelation of their companion’s identity, but to the extended social interaction which led up to and even embodied it—the everyday human experience of shared journey and shared meal.

We should not miss the wider implications of this ending. Just as the other disciples are at one remove from the events, needing to rely on a report of a numinous disclosure of Jesus’ identity within an explicitly social context, so too do readers of the New Testament share this experience, as we seek to discern flashes of the divine momentarily irradiating the social realities in which they are experienced. The large issue thrown up by this is the connection between social setting and theological affirmation, between context and kerygma.

Luke is by no means the only evangelist who explicitly raises this question of the social embodiment of the divine presence. Matthew, for example, can say ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18:20) and again ‘Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age’ (Matt. 28:20). Furthermore, when John states in his Prologue that ‘The word was made flesh and dwelt among us’ (1:14a), the second part of this affirmation plainly acknowledges the importance of the social dimensions of God’s presence among us, even though early christological controversies have caused most attention to be fixed on the first part. The Synoptic accounts of Jesus calming the storm on the sea of Galilee (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25) also offer a striking example of the contextualization of the kerygma, with the power of Jesus blazing out among a group of the disciples in the one boat, leaving them to wonder at his identity. Yet in Luke’s Emmaus narrative we have the most graphic and compelling presentation of the insight that context, in its ordinary and everyday aspects, and kerygma are intimately connected. Generations of European artists who have portrayed the supper at Emmaus, Garavaggio and Rembrandt in particular, bear witness to the evocative power of Luke’s insight.

What holds for Luke holds for the rest of the New Testament. To appreciate the character of the transcendental affirmations communicated in the twenty-seven documents of which it is comprised we must comprehend their contexts, the
particular social scenarios of the first-century Mediterranean world in which the sacred manifested itself. This inevitably means that New Testament interpretation will be historical in nature. All of the contributors to this volume share an interest in this historical task of situating the meanings communicated by the New Testament texts within their first-century contexts. They wish to understand New Testament scenarios for the sacred.4

Yet what distinguishes their work from other types of research into these texts is that they consider it necessary explicitly to enlist help from the social sciences, anthropology, sociology and social psychology in particular. The methodology of social-scientific interpretation, in general terms, has been explained in a number of places recently by some of its practitioners and I will not repeat it here,5 although I will take up the critical issue of models below. Thus, the work of the contributors to this volume is avowedly inter-disciplinary in nature. They recognize the truth of Vernon Robbins’ observation (p. 275 below) that the defensive perimeters erected around ‘properly historical method’ by critics who oppose the importation of social-scientific ideas into biblical criticism are really social constructs, purity restrictions of the type described by Mary Douglas (Douglas 1966).

We may go further and assert that traditional disciplinary boundaries are unnecessary and unfortunate limitations on our understanding of Christian beginnings and must not be allowed to impede our investigations. Perhaps we should adopt in relation to them the attitude once expressed by a great British jurist towards old forms of action which were impeding the development of principles suitable to the needs of the present, namely, ‘when these ghosts of the past stand in the path of justice clanking their medieval chains, the proper course for the judge is to pass through them undeterred’.6

By and large, the essays which follow emphasize context rather than kerygma. Moving to a kerygmatic focus means shifting from the historical question of what the texts meant to their original audience, to the contemporary one of what they might mean today. In many quarters one now hears the cry that New Testament scholars should be doing just that, although such a view underestimates the distinctiveness of historical enquiry and the confusion which results if we too easily blur the character of the New Testament texts as documents from the past with the role they may play in the present. On the other hand, it is sometimes even suggested that historical method is unable to contribute to the development of contemporary meaning (Watson 1994). Against views such as these, in the fourth and last section of this introductory essay I will set out with assistance from the theology of George Lindbeck how I envisage that the type of historical research represented in this volume can play a role in helping contemporary readers appropriate New Testament meanings. Indeed, I will go beyond this to argue that such a process cannot proceed apart from an appreciation of the historical dimension of these texts. As we will see, however, the appropriation which I have in mind is something which can only take place in the context of a believing community. Although New Testament critics may be able to unveil the
nature of the original connection between text and context and even advocate, at a general level (as I will do below), how such connections might be brought into dialogue with contemporary experience, the contextualization of the kerygma can only be achieved by a community. To anticipate Lindbeck’s theory for a moment, only the faithful themselves can make the New Testament story their story.

**MODELS**

The essays in this volume employ a number of areas of social-scientific enquiry. At a very general level, all of them can be regarded as exercises in the sociology of knowledge to the extent that they seek dialectically to relate social realities with cognition and symbolism, in other words, context with kerygma. More particularly, however, the sociology of sectarianism is employed by Elliott. Social psychology forms the framework of the essays by Malina and Pilch. David Horrell adopts the structuration theory formulated by Anthony Giddens. Mediterranean anthropology is utilized by Duling, Joubert, Love, Neyrey, Rohrbaugh and, to an extent, myself.

All the essays are notable for their deliberate use of social-scientific ideas and perspectives, especially in the form of explicitly formulated models and perspectives. John Elliott has rightly pointed out that this approach is characteristic of social-scientific criticism and differentiates it, for example, from a social history which attempts to investigate social aspects of early Christianity without availing itself of help from anthropology, sociology or social psychology (Elliott 1993a:7). In this context a model may be described in an admittedly broadbrush way as an ‘abstract, simplified representation of some real world object, event or interaction, constructed for the purpose of understanding, control or prediction’ (Malina 1983:14). Models are heuristic tools, not ontological statements. Accordingly, they are either useful or not, and it is meaningless to ask whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’.

Unfortunately, not everyone is yet convinced of the value of using models in New Testament interpretation. One objection sometimes taken (although usually in the form of laconic grumbling, rather than reasoned discussion) is that the use of models constitutes the imposition of alien and inappropriate frameworks on first-century data and that, therefore, they should be avoided. The short (and to my mind irrefutable) answer to this is that we all use models in our work; the only question is whether or not we acknowledge them and bring them out into the open for critical scrutiny. Whenever New Testament critics discuss textual features in terms such as ‘family’, ‘class’, ‘polities’, ‘power’, religion’, ‘personality’, ‘conscience’, or ‘boundary-markers’ they are employing models, although usually implicit and unrecognized ones deriving from modern experience quite remote from biblical culture, with the inevitable risk of ethnocentric and anachronistic readings.
A more interesting criticism of models has been made recently by Susan Garrett (1992), in which she defends ‘sociological’ interpretation but proposes that it be ‘interpretive’ rather than model-oriented in nature. Garrett seeks to relate discussion over the use of models in New Testament criticism to an ongoing debate in the human sciences themselves. Her initial point is whether social-scientific inquiry should be seen as science or a humanistic discipline. Following Marcus and Fischer (1986) and Peacock (1986), she contrasts a scientific or quasi-scientific methodology adopted by social scientists who ‘assume that social groups follow laws or law-like patterns’ which consists of testing a model or hypothesis against empirical data to produce ‘objective’ or ‘valid’ results (a method she calls ‘nomothetic’, ‘hypothetico-deductive’ and ‘positivist’), with an approach which recognizes that human social discourse is always expressed in symbolic forms whose meaning is relative to particular sets of social and cultural circumstances. This relativity and the multivalent quality of symbolic forms ‘resist the abstractions of the scientist’. The latter approach is ‘interpretive’ and does not claim ‘objective’ validity for its findings. In particular, she proposes the symbolic perspective of Clifford Geertz as the clearest case of the interpretive approach, in its focus on the analysis of cultural systems through symbols and their power to constitute reality. This approach has ample room for subjectivity, since the aim is to produce an interpretation which has been filtered through the experience and worldview of the interpreter. She claims that the total immersion in a foreign culture by an ethnographer is a classic method for accomplishing symbolic interpretation and that in practice many ethnographers find a rigorous model-testing approach inappropriate. Accordingly, while agreeing with John H.Elliott that exegetes must make ‘intentional and well-documented decisions about their methodological perspectives’, such explicitness does not necessitate model-testing. She alleges that the interpretive method constitutes a more adequate treatment of the continual problem of how one can ever translate the discourse or social script of one culture into another (‘incommensurability’), since it sticks closer to the natives’ point of view, to cultural particularity, whereas the ‘positivist’ approach—which employs cross-cultural comparison and gives credit to law-like patterns despite superficial cultural differences—is less concerned with this issue. Yet she acknowledges that even interpretive researchers such as Geertz employ ‘etic’ categories, that is, those of trained outsiders, and that it is always necessary to strike a balance between insider (‘emic’) and etic categories, although without being too specific about just what type of etic perspectives are permissible.

In anthropological terms, it is clear that there is a tension between the ethnographic discernment of what native people think—in all its particularity—and the formulation of models or theories which can be employed cross-culturally. The issue is how to reconcile the experience and conceptualizations of actor and observer. Until recently the former aspect seems to have been regarded as the privileged partner (Kuper 1992:2). In recent years, however, there has been a growing realization that cultural anthropology needs both aspects.
The influential figures whose essays appear in the collection edited by Kuper (such as Fredrik Earth, Philippe Descola and Maurice Bloch) are united in the view that ‘together, ethnography and theoretically informed comparison constitute a single plausible enterprise’ (Kuper 1992:2). All human groups, however diverse, are capable of communicating with one another. Merely to entertain the possibility of one culture seeking to understand or even translate another presupposes the necessary foundations in human nature and human sociality which transcend ethnographic particularity (see Garrithers 1992).

These writers are careful, however, to specify the type of models they have in mind to ensure a reasonable degree of contiguity between emic and etic perspectives. Thus Bloch calls for researchers not to base models on the assumption that natives (or observers!) think in terms of propositions linked by logical inferences in a single lineal sequence, but rather on the recognition that thought relies on clumped networks of signification organized in multi-stranded, non-lineal ways (Bloch 1992:129–130). Similarly, Descola, rather than defending the grand universals of older theory, advocates that research be focused on local systems of variants that exist in a particular series of landscapes and within a specific historical period (Descola 1992). Both Bloch and Descola recognize the importance of ecological factors in cultural differentiation.

Heavily interpretive approaches, on the other hand, are riddled with difficulties. Destabilizing the whole interpretivist project is a fundamental paradox. As Descola has pointed out, excessive concentration on particularity results in the failure to produce an interpretive framework necessary to discuss cross-cultural differences, resulting in a kind of ‘cognitive apartheid’ (Descola 1992: 108). This is the problem of the radical relativism of strongly ethnographic research. To seek to know and to describe other cultures only in their own terms means both that one has embraced a fundamental relativism and, moreover, that those other cultures are largely unknowable to us in the later twentieth-century West. For this reason, Garrett’s view, noted above, that the adoption of native viewpoints involved in the interpretive method provides a more adequate method for cross-cultural translation is regrettably misconceived.

Another problem with interpretivism for New Testament research is that it is largely incompatible with historical method. In seeking to understand the complex web of meaning in a particular culture at a given time interpretivists may find it relevant to address the extent to which folk history or folk memory features in that web, but they have no role for the techniques of historical analysis, for the etic or model-driven investigation of diachronic developments which may be crucial to our understanding of the phenomenon. The sectarian model set out by John H.Elliott in this volume, for example, could not be accommodated within an interpretive view of early Christianity, nor could the model fixing on the transition from reform movement to sect which I have developed with respect to early post-Easter Christianity (Esler 1987:47–70).

Perhaps the ultimate danger with the heavily interpretive and ethnographic approach is that it falls prey to a radical post-modernism. The advocates of
models and theory retain a belief in the duty of the social scientist to communicate and they recognize that this means imposing some order on reality. The post-modernist antipathy to such ‘meta-narratives’ seems to leave social scientists only two possibilities—either Stephen Tyler’s wildly unhelpful notion that the meanings of the other can only be evoked, through poetry for example (Tyler 1986), or the notion that, at the end of the day, all that matters is the researcher’s own experience. Even Geertz has acknowledged the ‘epistemological hypochondria’ (in part a product of post-modernist deconstruction) which is inducing many ethnographers to despair of being able to say anything at all about other forms of life (Geertz 1988:71–72).13

Finally, at the practical level, in the case of research dependent on ancient texts like the New Testament documents, although one would certainly not wish to say that interpretive criticism is impossible, plainly the customary total immersion in another culture by a trained observer is out of the question and this suggests that a model-oriented approach is less problematic.

As far as New Testament criticism is concerned, the main problem with Garrett’s analysis is that its image of ‘positivist’ model-using is a stalking-horse having no resemblance to social-scientific interpretation as it is actually practised. New Testament critics who employ this method, including the authors represented in this volume, certainly do not claim that there are social laws, or that their results are ‘objectively valid’ (although since they certainly reject the view that one historical opinion is as good as another, they may well claim that their views are more plausible than some). No ontological status is accorded to the models; they are seen merely as heuristic tools. Either they throw up a set of new and interesting questions, which the texts themselves must answer, or they do not. Models which do not have this result will be discarded and replaced with others. Social-scientific modelling yields insight rather than necessarily embodying truth. Garrett herself, somewhat inconsistently, approves of interpretation in which the ‘models are used as heuristic devices, to prompt questions and highlight possible connections among the data’ (Garrett 1992:95–96), and that is overwhelmingly the approach taken in social-scientific criticism generally and in the essays which follow.

Models will have built into them certain modern assumptions and perceptions, but these are essential if we are to address cultural experience different from our own in terms we can comprehend. The debate is really about what assumptions we should adopt, not whether we model or not. The necessity of making sense of the strange world of the first-century GE as manifested in the New Testament becomes even more important when we seek to move beyond the historical analysis of the original meanings of the texts to the appropriation of those meanings within the experience of contemporary communities.

Moreover, like the authors in the Kuper volume mentioned above, the authors represented here are committed both to ethnographic observation and to the use of models and other perspectives. Many of them have even been influenced by Geertz. They have been at pains to bring emic data into dialogue with the etic
categories employed. This does not mean that some are not more rigorously systematic in their use of models than others.

On the other hand, as already noted, the danger with an avowedly interpretive approach to biblical criticism is that its practitioners, if they find that post-modernist criticism actually leaves them with anything to do, since they lack the aid of models and theory generally they risk slipping into a morass of relativism. Without a methodology which highlights cross-cultural similarities and differences, they are likely to read the biblical texts in terms of twentieth-century Western culture. Hence the necessity, for example, of employing the perspectives generated by recent anthropologists concerning the contemporary Mediterranean region to provide an alternative set of scenarios to those we would otherwise unconsciously employ. In its regional and ecological emphasis, this project fits nicely into the type of approach advocated by Descola and mentioned above. Anyone familiar from recent anthropological research with the centrality of honour in the Mediterranean area today, for example, will find that the Bible is replete with references to it, yet two decades ago (before Bruce Malina began pointing it out) there was virtually no recognition of this. The exegetical essays below by Neyrey, Duling, Rohrbaugh, Love and Joubert, for example, amply demonstrate the significance of Mediterranean attitudes to family honour for understanding a wide range of New Testament texts. Rohrbaugh is even able to show not only that a convincing reading of Luke 4:1–30 requires a familiarity with Mediterranean culture, but that in some cases pre-modern commentators actually understood issues opaque to modern critics. Accordingly, Garrett’s brusque resistance to the use of Mediterranean cultural anthropology in biblical criticism (Garrett 1992:97) is ill-advised.

**CONTEXT**

**The world of first-century Palestine**

Christianity came to life in the world of first-century Palestine. Yet this world — and the Mediterranean generally — diverges widely from our modern experience in terms of many significant social variables. The essays by Scan Freyne, John Pilch and Duncan Derrett explore bedrock features of New Testament context in areas such as economics, primary religious experience, magic and witchcraft, the configurations of which are quite foreign to the world of Northern Europe and North America.

Freyne adopts two models from the area of economic anthropology drawn from T.F.Carney, the first relating to a stable economy and the second to a developing one, and applies them to a rich set of data derived both from recent archaeological research and literary evidence to investigate economic development in Antipas’ Galilee. The particular foci of his investigation are markets, monetization and the way in which institutions and values changed in
response to developments in both. His presentation of economic issues in Galilee has important consequences for the quest for the historical Jesus, since he is able to relate aspects of the Jesus tradition to the dynamic forces unleashed by the evolving Herodian market economy.

Pilch is concerned with altered states of consciousness, an aspect of human experience foreign to most Northern European or North American readers of the Bible, except those in contact with the more genuinely uninhibited forms of Pentecostalism, yet common human experience in the majority of the world’s cultures, including 80 per cent of circum-Mediterranean societies. Interpreting the transfiguration of Jesus as a typical experience of alternate reality carries a strong measure of cultural plausibility in the Mediterranean world and enables Pilch to offer an explanation for the event very different from those normally proposed.

Derrett’s essay on the Evil Eye (a social feature of fundamental importance in the region for several millennia) represents a response to a proposal made in recent research that the Evil Eye was connected with illness. He seeks to differentiate the ways in which Greeks and Jews understood the phenomenon, arguing that in the Jewish sources, and in the New Testament, the Evil Eye is related to envy and grudging, rather than witchcraft and illness. Derrett ends by raising the possibility that the absence of a connection between the Evil Eye and sickness in the New Testament may be related to the implementation of the love commandment, which puts an end the envy which is the source of the Evil Eye.

**Early Christian group formation and maintenance**

A fundamental aspect of inquiry into early Christianity, covered in the next four essays, is how to interpret the ways in which the social entities which formed around those who followed Jesus and later acknowledged him as Messiah established and maintained their distinctive identities. This remains an area of lively debate. A productive line of research has been the sociology of sectarianism, beginning with Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch and developing in the hands of Richard Niebuhr and Bryan Wilson. One of the earliest proponents of this approach, John Elliott (1981; 1991c) has returned to the theme in this volume to propose and employ a diachronic model which characterizes the growth of the Jesus movement before and after Easter in terms of a development from faction to sect.\(^{15}\) Elliott focuses on a number of variables relating to the conditions favouring the development of a sectarian group, the characteristics of such a group and the strategies it might adopt. These variables allow one to interrogate the evidence for any first-century Christian group with a high degree of penetration and detail to see where it lay on this issue. The sharply nuanced profiles of different groups which emerge under such analysis provide a challenging answer to critics who have reservations about the appropriateness of sectarian theory for New Testament criticism.\(^{16}\)
Bruce Malina proposes a quite different way of envisioning early Christian social organization. His aim is to develop a model of the formation of small groups which might fit the data we have of the first generations of Christians. He focuses on three issues: (1) why small groups form at all; (2) the five distinctive stages through which they develop—forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning; (3) the reason for joining groups—to achieve change, either intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup or extragroup. Broadly speaking, he sees the Christians as members of ‘face-to-face’ groups in a ‘face-to-mace’ society. An important theme is to contrast the task-oriented group which formed around Jesus (focusing on intergroup change with political implications for Israel) from the social activity groups (‘elective associations’) which eventually formed after his death and resurrection (focusing on the cosmic rescue of the person, with strong bonds of fictive kinship, in a household setting).

John Barclay addresses another issue bearing upon the manner in which early Christian groups established and maintained a distinct social identity, in particular with respect to Judaism and the phenomenon of internal dissent. In each case he fixes upon the notion of deviance as developed by sociologists like Becker (1963) and Schur (1971) as a product of social interaction, rather than as an objectively definable entity. In this perspective the critical questions are who defines someone as ‘deviant’ (or ‘apostate’), in what circumstances, from what perspective and in whose interests. The process can be seen at work with respect both to its external and internal aspects in Paul’s treatment as an ‘apostasizing’ Jew in Jewish communities and in his labelling of certain persons as ‘deviants’ in his churches.

The conversion process itself is the topic of Nicholas Taylor’s paper. He applies to early Christianity a scheme formulated by Shaye Cohen (1989) which distinguishes seven categories of increasingly intimate association between a gentile and neighbouring Jews which might result in a complete conversion to Judaism. This leads him to opt for a model of conversion as resocialization (based on Snow and Machalek 1983), which identifies four critical elements as: (1) autobiographical reconstruction of the convert; (2) the assumption of a comprehensive attribution scheme, which means that phenomena are accounted for within the framework of a newly acquired belief system; (3) suspension of analogical reasoning, which means the adoption of the view that the new faith is unique and all others are categorically distinct from it; and (4) the assumption of a master role, whereby the convert comes to identify totally with the new affiliation and seeks to represent it to outsiders.

**Family and honour in Matthew and Luke**

Four of the contributions address issues in the Gospels of Matthew (Neyrey and Duling) and Luke (Rohrbaugh and Love) connected with critical Mediterranean realities of the honour attached to one through family membership. Neyrey and Duling demonstrate how both pre-Matthean tradition and Matthew may
be understood within a process of the fraught replacement of natural kin by the fictive kinship of the Jesus faction and early Christian groups.

Neyrey’s thesis is that the Q tradition underlying the Matthean beatitudes is directed to assisting disciples to come to terms with the loss of honour and material resources they suffered within their families when they decided to follow Jesus. He proposes that the four original makarisms which formed the basis of Matt. 5:3–12 describe the unfortunate fate of a disciple who has been ostracized as a ‘rebellious son’ by his family on account of his loyalty to Jesus. On this view the beatitudes function to honour the dishonoured.

Yet the severing of ties with real kin highlighted by Neyrey is compensated by incorporation into the fictive kinship of the group(s) which formed around Jesus and continued in various ways after his death. Duling’s essay deals with a central aspect of this process, by arguing that the Matthean ekklesia should be regarded as a fictive kinship group or, more particularly, a fictive brotherhood association. Building on Gerhard Lenski’s treatment of the Roman empire as an advanced agrarian society in which small fictive kin groups emerge when natural families are in decline, he proposes that the Matthean community developed into a social entity best comparable with the voluntary associations of the first-century Graeco-Roman world. His thesis is that Matthew and his audience represented a well-educated, self-sufficient scribal group dominating a mixed community but who were marginal in the sense that they existed on a margin between two competing normative schemes, the old Jewish one and the new one of Christian brotherhood and discipleship.

The proper honour of a son comes to prominence again in Rohrbaugh’s essay on Luke 4:1–30. With a firm grasp on recent anthropological research (strengthened by his own experience on the West Bank), Rohrbaugh interprets this text (and Luke 3:23–38) in the context of Mediterranean village understanding of family honour in a way which offers incisive solutions to several questions traditionally misunderstood. He proposes that the genealogy of Jesus (3:23–38) is naturally placed to establish a claim to his ascribed honour as son of God, which is then tested in challenge-and-response interactions, first on a cosmic plane with the Devil (4:1–13), and then with the people in his own village. In this perspective Jesus’ change in mood at 4:23 is not virtually inexplicable (as so many modern commentators find it), but a natural response to the blunt insult of the villagers’ question ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’, which presupposes that it is a serious breach of local conventions relating to family honour for the son of a mere carpenter to speak like this in public. Rohrbaugh is able to underline the ethnocentric nature of modern misreadings of this verse by referring to pre-modern interpreters who saw the point.

Stuart Love turns to a different aspect of the way in which family honour was reshaped within one section of early Christianity—the issue of whether women should attend banquets. Normally courtesans, not wives, dined with men, although the Romans were somewhat less strict on this than the Greeks. Having demonstrated the male-centred nature of banquets in the Graeco-Roman world of
the time and the shamefulness involved in women attending, Love argues that Luke reshapes prevailing social conventions by presenting a picture of the incorporation of outcast women into Christian fellowship meals.

**Paul, kinship and ideology**

Joubert’s essay on Paul’s Corinthian correspondence fuses theoretical perspectives deriving from anthropological research into Mediterranean family life and the quasi-kinship involved in patron-client relations with a detailed survey of the Roman institution of _paterfamilias_. He advocates the particular relevance of the Roman experience by reason of the status of Corinth as a Roman colony founded by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE after having lain in ruins for a century. Joubert demonstrates with reference to a large amount of textual data how Paul functions both as a broker moving between the ‘heavenly patrons’ (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the Corinthian ‘clients’ and, even more noticeably, as a _paterfamilias_, establishing a particular kind of affective relationship, correcting behaviour and dealing with conflict.

Whereas Joubert employs social anthropology to set Paul within a first-century context, David Horrell, approaching from a sociological direction in the form of Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, unmasks the ideological structures which may be discerned in the family imagery (including _paterfamilias_) employed in certain letters by Paul or written in his name. Horrell focuses in particular on the role of ideology in Giddens’ theory to refer to the cognitive, symbolic or linguistic systems by which the powerful justify their methods of domination. The most common forms of ideology occurring in relation to religion are the representation of sectional interests as universal ones and the naturalization (or ‘reification’) of the present. Horrell notes that legitimation of dominating structures may be intended or unintended and that texts may ‘escape’ from the intentions of their creators, to have a range of entirely unanticipated results, a phenomenon also noted by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Horrell next applies this theory to a sample of Pauline and pseudo-Pauline texts to investigate the extent to which Paul is involved, either deliberately or unintentionally, in the ideological maintenance of power. His findings that Pauline and pseudo-Pauline texts have the potential for the theological naturalization or reification of first-century patterns of domestic domination raise disturbing questions both for exegesis and for the modern appropriation of biblical experience.

**Oppression, war and peace**

At a high level of generality my own essay pursues a sociology of knowledge approach to the interpretation of three Jewish apocalypses written after and in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE by seeking to discern the connections they reveal between this experience and their theology. Adopting a view of Michel Foucault on the way in which power, ideology and
discourse cluster together, I propose that these texts respond to the Roman ideology of imperial subjugation expressed in the discourses of ritual, coinage and monumental architecture, an ideology explicable within the honour/shame value system of Mediterranean society. In the case of 2 Baruch this involves the development of a counter-ideology and counter-discourse focusing on the fate of the Temple vessels.

Mediterranean warfare is also taken up by Ray Hobbs, who discusses the extent to which the language of war has found its way into the New Testament and the implications of the choice of such imagery. He differentiates his approach from that of numerous commentators on this subject by exploring the socio-cultural context of this semantic field rather than its literary ‘background’. His central concern is with the extent to which metaphors such as warfare function to define the social values of a group and as a means of self-definition. His particular (social-psychological) model is the ‘Masada Syndrome’, a state in which members of a group have a central belief that the rest of the world has highly negative behavioural intentions towards them. In contrast with other imagery, such as that of the household, Hobbs shows that the military metaphor reflects and promotes certain aspects of behaviour, such as boundary control and heroic suffering. Finally, he raises the disturbing question of the appropriateness of the warrior as an image of the disciple—then or now.

Since war is the focus of the penultimate two contributions, it is perhaps appropriate to end the collection with one devoted to the establishment of peace—in the form of Vernon Robbins’ essay on the prospects for cooperation between social-scientific and literary-critical approaches. As one of the very few commentators at home in both, Robbins offers a diagnosis of the current (generally unfriendly) state of relations between the two, sets out a particular type of accommodation and urges reasons for greater cooperation. His starting-point is the issue of disciplinarity in biblical research. He rightly observes that disciplinary limits are really social constructs, purity boundaries of the type explained by Mary Douglas, which their proponents use to keep at bay ‘impurities’ which would otherwise intrude—like mud trampled into one’s living room by an unwelcome visitor. His answer is not eclecticism, with its essential abandonment of disciplinarity, but inter-disciplinarity, where the methods of various disciplines are employed to interrogate a set of data and the results are then brought into fruitful dialogue. Robbins views rhetoric as central to the integration of social-scientific and literary-critical approaches and his own nuanced socio-rhetorical model has the potential to open up numerous lines of enquiry. While acutely pointing out the difficulties which proponents of either methodology have with the other, he argues that they do have certain features in common worth building on. In particular, in ascribing to the need for the conscious application of theory they both stand in stark opposition to the post-modernist rejection of method.
KERYGMA

As already noted, to bring out the kerygmatic dimensions of the New Testament texts means bridging the gap between history and theology, between what the texts meant and what they might mean. But here we need to ask ‘mean for whom?’ We need to distinguish between a present meaning for the Christian faithful, immersed in the various forms of Christian ecclesial life, and a rather different meaning for the Christian theologian, who is seeking to make intellectual sense of the processes. Some theologians see the main issue as the critical evaluation of Christian truth claims. An example in point is Francis Watson, who, in a major contribution on the hermeneutical question (Watson 1994), seems primarily interested in addressing those for whom such claims, especially his primary one ‘Jesus is Lord’, are problematic. His target audience seems to be Christian thinkers limping along with suspect ontologies, or agnostics, post-modernist or otherwise, kind enough still to be interested in the topic—the Porphyries of the twentieth century. Either way, we are talking mainly about a few thousand academics in Europe, North America and their colonial offshoots. The danger of emphasizing this audience is that of theology giving way entirely to apologetics. This would be especially unfortunate in Watson’s case, given his dedicated interest in the socio-political impact and function of Christian theology.

While the vigorous exposition of Christian doctrine within the canons of contemporary discourse is an important task, we should not forget all those believing Christians for whom Christian truth claims are not really an issue. There are about one billion of these. The challenge is to enable the New Testament to speak to them in the present—to empower, to provoke, to activate. We must expose the original meanings of the texts in a way which will facilitate their recontextualization by present-day Christian groups. Georg Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of the horizons of the past and the present, their mutual co-existence in creative tension, offers the beginnings of a path forward (Esler 1994a:2–3). The dynamic nature of this dialogue is fostered by the strangeness of the biblical world as revealed by Mediterranean anthropology which emerges in so many of the essays below.

Yet to speak of a fusion of horizons in this way is to operate at a fairly high level of abstraction. To investigate more precisely how such fusion might occur it is necessary to attend to the nature of the historical investigation under discussion. The type of original meaning of interest here is that which emerges from the integration of social-scientific ideas and perspectives into historical analysis. Historical interpretation infused with social-scientific insights focuses on New Testament documents as written from and for early Christian communities in the throes of creating new social worlds for themselves. It treats them as texts which integrate context and kerygma. Only with this method is it possible to penetrate the critically important social dimensions of early Christianity, above all the inter-relationship between social context and the theologies of New Testament texts, which is the target of a sociology of
knowledge mode of analysis, as outlined for example by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (see Esler 1987).

The theological appropriation of this form of historical research requires an understanding of contemporary Christian theology with which the historical results might be brought into conjunction, or, in Gadamer’s perspective, creative tension. In other words, a style of New Testament exegesis which focuses on the texts as written for early Christian communities in the process of creating new social worlds (in which context and Gospel traditions are brought together beneath an overarching symbolic universe) is more likely to speak to the present Christian situation if the latter can be construed in reasonably analogous terms.

Among contemporary Christian theologians, George Lindbeck has come closest to an understanding of Christian theology which satisfies this requirement in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Lindbeck 1984), a work inspired by his deep commitment to ecumenical dialogue. In Lindbeck’s model of religion, as a kind of cultural framework which shapes the entirety of life and thought, I find a way of construing the present Christian situation in workably analogous terms. It is worth stressing that since I am treating Lindbeck’s proposal as a model, as a heuristic tool productive of insight, not as necessarily being an expression of ontological truth, my interest lies in whether it is useful, not in whether it is ‘true’; this distinction seems lost on those who criticize Lindbeck for the philosophical underpinnings of his theory (Phillips 1988).

Lindbeck distinguishes three contemporary theories of religion and doctrine, with respect to which he proposes an alternative. The first, which he labels ‘cognitive’, stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. The second theory, which he calls ‘experiential-expressive’, interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations. He associates this theory with liberal Christianity stemming ultimately from Schleiermacher. The third theory, represented by Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, embraces both the cognitive-propositional and the experientialsymbolic (p. 16).

In contrast to these theories, Lindbeck utilizes perspectives from anthropology (Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz), sociology (Karl Marx and Peter Berger) and philosophy (Wittgenstein, Ninian Smart and William Christian), perspectives which have hitherto had little impact on theology, to develop a theory of religion as resembling a language or culture. In this theory, which he describes as ‘cultural-linguistic’, religions constitute reality and value systems, or idioms for the construing of reality and the living of life. For Lindbeck, church doctrines function not as truth claims or expressive symbols, but as ‘communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action’ (p. 18).

According to Lindbeck, a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium which shapes the entirety of life and thought:
It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (although it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though those will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.

(p. 33)

The extent to which religion is understood as a communal phenomenon highlights the way in which this perspective meshes with approaches to the New Testament which focus upon the relationship between social context and theology.

At a general level, the cultural-linguistic model of religion treats the internal experience of its adherents as deriving from external realities; it sees human experience as shaped, moulded and, in a sense, constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. In this respect it reveals its indebtedness to the internalization of human social productions as described by Berger and Luckmann. Of particular interest, however, is the precise mode by which Lindbeck sees this internalization process occurring. For Lindbeck, this occurs through the appropriation of the primal stories of a religious tradition by subsequent generations:

To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms. A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that moulds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or preconceptual experience.

(p. 34)

Again, however, it should be noted that the community is seen as the locus for the appropriation of the story:

The proclamation of the Gospel, as a Christian would put it, may be first of all the telling of the story, but this gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.

(p. 36)

Yet, in spite of criticism which has frequently been levelled at him, Lindbeck does not suggest that cognitive claims are excluded from the picture, rather that the emphasis is no longer on them. He sets out his position on this issue very clearly in a section entitled ‘Excursus on Religion and Truth’. He begins by acknowledging that to do justice to the actual speech and practice of
religious people we must allow for the possible prepositional truth of a religion. If we take a statement such as ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’, it is clear that the great strength of a cognitive-prepositional theory of religion is that it admits of the possibility of the truth of such a claim, whereas an experiential-expressive one does not. His primary point is that a cultural-linguistic theory can also do so.

To explain how this is so he distinguishes between the ‘intrasystematic’ and the ‘ontological’ truth of statements. The first is the truth of coherence to some relevant system and the second the truth of correspondence to reality which, according to epistemological realists, is attributable to first-order propositions. According to Lindbeck, religious utterances can have an ontological truth, can correspond to reality in and of itself, but they do so in a distinctive way, as part of a wider conformity of self to God. Thus when a religious person affirms ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ the words not only convey the objective reality of Christ’s Lordship (although that is also something that they definitely do convey) but they are implicated in the subjective disposition of those who utter them. Thus Luther frequently states that I cannot genuinely assert that Jesus is ‘the Lord’ unless I also make him ‘my Lord’ (p. 66). For this reason it is appropriate to treat religious utterance as propositional only to the extent that it is also performative; that is to say, the assertion of religious truths necessarily involves a personal commitment to the consequences of their truth. Lindbeck is careful to explain that ‘this performatory conformity of the self to God can also be pictured in epistemologically realistic fashion as involving a correspondence of the mind to divine reality’ (p. 66). He applies the same reasoning to the statement ‘Jesus Christ rose from the dead’, since here ‘the claim that Jesus truly and objectively was raised from the dead provides the warrant for behaving in the ways recommended by the resurrection stories even when one grants the impossibility of specifying the mode in which those stories signify’ (p. 67).

Lindbeck’s conclusion on this issue is worth noting:

a religion can be interpreted as possibly containing ontologically true affirmations, not only in cognitivist theories but also in cultural-linguistic ones. There is nothing in the cultural-linguistic approach that requires the rejection (or the acceptance) of the epistemological realism and correspondence theory of truth, which, according to most of the theological tradition, is implicit in the conviction of believers that when they rightly use a sentence such as ‘Christ is Lord’ they are uttering a true first-order proposition.

(pp. 67–68)

The theory of religion set out by Lindbeck paves the way for the integration of the results of historical criticism of the New Testament, at least to the extent that it is informed by the social sciences, into a new style of New Testament theology. One qualification must be made, however. Although Lindbeck’s theory operates by speaking of religion as analogous to a culture or a language, when he
proceeds to details in the latter part of the work the cultural aspect seems to be overwhelmed by the linguistic or textual one. He introduces the notion of ‘intratextuality’ (p. 114) as a way of speaking of the immanent location of meaning and goes so far as to assert that ‘An intratextual reading tries to derive the interpretive framework that designates the theologically controlling sense from the literary structure of the text itself’ (p. 120). As Wayne Meeks has observed (1986b:180–181), this view seems to pick up Hans Frei’s argument against all forms of ‘referential’ hermeneutics and is inimical to the diachronic investigations of the historical critics. The answer to Lindbeck’s view on this issue, which should be seen as an unnecessary and unfortunate modification of the broad thrust of his theory, is that, as amply revealed by the essays in this volume, texts can only be understood in context. Thus, in adopting Lindbeck’s model, I take ‘story’ to mean not a decontextualized narrative, but rather to convey the existential sense of a biographical or autobiographical account relating or reflecting actual human experience.

We should acknowledge, however, that there will be occasions when we must question aspects of the way the early Christians retold the story of Jesus as their story. As Horrell and Hobbs have pointed out in their essays, even at the earliest stages of the Christian movement there are signs of the incorporation of ideology and imagery which seem at odds with the bedrock of our tradition—the subversive memory of Jesus. Accordingly, there will be times in assimilating their versions of the primal story when we will need to recognize and excise distortions which have crept in with the telling.

Although we share with these early Christians (then not even bearing that name) the kerygmatic utterance ‘Jesus is Lord’, to see what that kerygma meant for them we need to understand the symbolic universes created when it was taken up in particular social settings. Accordingly, social-scientific New Testament interpretation becomes theologically relevant within Lindbeck’s theory to the extent that it, and it alone, provides paradigms, the oldest available, of Christian ways of living in the world.

The goal of a New Testament theology based on a cultural-linguistic theory of religion is neither the defence of propositions alleged to be ontologically true nor the unreflective iteration of biblical ideas and symbols. Rather, it is the formation of contemporary communities whose identity has been informed, within their own local situations, by a critical appropriation of the ‘story’ of the first Christians, that is, by the assimilation of the experience they had of shaping the story of Jesus, and of God’s presence in the world which he represented, to the diverse exigencies of their own contexts. Sharing the foundations of their faith, yet within our own contexts and with our own self-understandings, we make their stories our story. As we continue on our journey through time and space, we draw inspiration and guidance from our deepening appreciation of how our first predecessors began that journey, of the goals they set, the ways they moved, and the hopes they nursed in their hearts.
Then we too may reach Emmaus, having had the experience described in the words from the Scots version of Luke’s Gospel as read at the liturgy concluding the Conference where the essays below were first delivered: ‘Wisna the hairts o us lowin in our breists, as he spak wi us on the gate and expundit the Scripturs til us?’

NOTES

3 Garavagio painted two versions of the scene, in c. 1600–1601 and c. 1606 (see Moir 1982:102 and 132), the second of which is reproduced on the cover of Esler 1994a, and Rembrandt painted three, one an early work from c. 1628 done in potent chiaroscuro, where the silhouette of the transformed Jesus creates a disturbingly numinous effect, and two more in 1648. Rembrandt also produced a number of etchings and pen and ink drawings on the theme (Hoekstra 1990:422–429).
4 I am indebted to John H. Elliott for the phrase ‘scenarios for the sacred’.
5 Esler 1987 and 1994a; Holmberg 1990; Elliott 1993a; Morgan and Barton 1988: 133–166. Explanations of the method by those who do not practise it are of less value.
6 Lord Atkin (1867–1944), in *United Australia Ltd v. Barclays Bank Ltd* (1941) AC 1, at 29.
7 The earliest work explicitly utilizing Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge known to me is Wayne Meeks’ superlative 1972 essay on the descending and ascending son of man motif in John’s Gospel (Meeks 1972).
8 John Barclay prefers to regard the perspective he employs from the sociology of deviance as a ‘sensitizing concept’ suggesting an angle of enquiry rather than a theory or model generating predictive hypotheses. Similarly, David Horrell prefers to describe Giddens’ notions as a ‘theoretical framework’ rather than a model. At a general level, however, it is clear that both approaches are indebted to social-scientific theory and that virtually everything said of models in what follows applies to them as well.
9 For an admirably detailed recent discussion of models, see Elliott 1993a: 40–48. For a briefer treatment, see Esler 1987:8–9.
10 See Elliott 1993a:94–95 for an effective (and amusing) critique of the ‘Procrustean bed’ or ‘cookie-cutter’ objection to models.
11 *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, oddly, has an entry for the sociology of early Christianity, but not one on anthropology, even though it has articles on both for the Old Testament. This results in the curiosity that the ever-burgeoning and productive New Testament research utilizing Mediterranean cultural anthropology inaugurated by Bruce Malina is left to be briefly treated by Garrett in her article on sociology. The lamentable omission of an article on this subject constitutes a serious deficiency in the general usefulness of the *Dictionary*. It should be rectified at an early date in a supplementary volume.
I am grateful to my colleagues Dr David Riches and Dr Nigel Rapport, of the
Department of Social Anthropology in the University of St Andrews, for discussing
this issue with me.

Vernon Robbins (p. 288 below) sees the adherence to theory in the face of post-
modernism as an important characteristic shared by social-scientific and literary-
critical approaches.

This is not to say that honour means exactly the same then as it does now, only that
there is an abiding core of meaning.

For a somewhat similar diachronic model, tracking certain strands of post-Easter
Christianity in terms of a development from reform movement to sect, see Esler

Bruce Malina prefers small group theory to sectarianism and Stephen Barton
(1993: 158) fears it is too blunt a tool in this context.

Wayne Meeks pointed out Lindbeck’s significance as providing a contemporary
style of theology which meshed with social-scientific interpretations of the New
Testament, especially those pursuing sociology of knowledge approaches, as long
ago as 1986 (Meeks 1986b).

On this view religions are seen as similar to philosophy or science as traditionally
conceived.

Michael Jackson has spoken of his ‘relative insouciance about ontological truth
claims’ (cited by Michalson 1988:111). Also see Phillips 1988. Much of the
criticism takes up philosophical issues while downplaying the critical cultural ones.
An important discussion is found in Marshall 1990.

To explain this view he employs the type of modest correspondence proposed by
Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, although in statements concerning God the human
mode of signifying does not correspond to anything in the divine being, the
signified (signification) does (Summa Theologiae I.13.3; CG I.30). In other words,
if we say ‘God is good’ we do not mean that God is good by human standards of
goodness, but rather that there is a standard of goodness, God’s own, which does
apply. Thus what ‘we assert, in other words, is that “God is good” is meaningful
and true,” but without knowing the meaning of “God is good”’ (p. 66). Despite its
informational vacuity, the statement ‘God is good’ is highly significant in the
context of the performative function of religious utterances just described ‘because
it authorizes responding as if he were good in the ways indicated by the stories of
creation, providence, and redemption which shape believers’ thoughts and actions’
(p. 67). Conversely, to commit oneself to thinking and acting as if God were good
in the sense described in the biblical stories involves asserting that he is good in
himself, even though the meaning of this latter claim is beyond human
understanding (p. 67).

This seems preferable to Meeks’ own answer—that sociology of knowledge
readings of the New Testament are not so much interested in the determination of
what really happened, the enterprise so decried by Frei, but rather in the meaning
of what the actors did and said within their culture and their unique subculture—
since this seems too closely associated with interpretive readings of the texts.
REFERENCES

REFERENCES 279


REFERENCES


Bildstein, Gerald (1975) Honour Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics, New York: KTAV
REFERENCES 281


REFERENCES


Dawes, G. (1990) ‘“But if you can gain your freedom” (1 Cor. 7:17 24)’, *CBQ* 52: 681–697.


REFERENCES 289


Hill, George Francis (1914) Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine (Galilee, Samaria, and Judaea), London: British Museum.


Jahn, O. (1855) cited at TWNT 1:595.


Johannes (1675) *Tractates de fascinatione novus et singularis*, Nuremberg.


Kornemann, Ernst (1900) ‘Koinon; Collegium’, PW 4.1, cols 380–479, suppl. 4, 915ff.; suppl. 5, 453ff.


Martin, Josef (1931) Symposion: Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums 17.1–2, Paderborn: F.Schoningh.


REFERENCES


—— (1979a) ‘Thematic or Systemic Description: The Case of Mishnah’s Division of Women’, in Jacob Neusner, Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press.


—— (1993b) ‘“Beat his Ribs While he is Young” (Sir 30:12): A Window on the Mediterranean World’, *BTB* 23:101–113.


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES 311


Trilling, Wolfgang (1964) *Dos Wahre Israel*, 3rd edn, Munich: Kössel Verlag.


