1

INTRODUCTION

This book grapples with the question of how we can understand a text produced in an ancient social world which was, in all probability, quite different from our own. In order to answer this question it draws on resources from the social sciences and therefore may appropriately be called a work of social-scientific interpretation. In New Testament studies, the field of social-scientific interpretation is no longer in its infancy.[1] Part of the broader purpose of this book, a generation on, is to take stock. It advocates a more integrated approach to conceiving the social worlds which we construct in order to assist us in the interpretative process. In doing so it draws attention to the liminal interface between values and practices, which I believe has been obscured in much of our application of social-scientific resources, which has tended to privilege either values or practices, social structures or social agency. The book's main thesis is that forms of piety which are frequently evident at this liminal interface and which were indigenous to first-century Judaea are particularly pertinent for our understanding of both the New Testament's 'poor' and the Johannine tradition, and that further they help account for the literature's distinctiveness, vis-à-vis the Synoptic tradition, in a more credible manner than the sectarian readings which currently dominate social approaches to the literature.

---

[1] The label 'social-scientific' finds its contemporary origins in the methodological debates of the Society of Biblical Literature's 1973 working group The Social World of Early Christianity: see J. Z. Smith, 'The Social Description of Early Christianity', *RSR* 1 (1975), 19–25. Also, P. Van Staden and A. Van Aarde, 'Social Description or Social-scientific Interpretation? A Survey of Modern Scholarship', *HTS* 47 (1991), 55–87.

2   The Judaean Poor and the Fourth Gospel

1   The problem of incommensurability

New Testament texts, like all texts, presuppose and encode infor-
mation regarding the social world in which they were produced. For
example, this text, amongst other things, presupposes a degree of
biblical literacy and encodes the conventions of Western academic
discourse. Therefore when we attempt an interpretation of a text,
especially an ancient text like the New Testament, it is prudent to
provide some means of revealing and discriminating differences
between our context, i.e. the Western academy, and that of the
authors or objects to be interpreted, i.e. the ancient world. To
interpret a New Testament text one has to contend with both the
contemporary point of view, the 'etic' perspective, and the first-
century point of view, the 'emic' perspective.[2] In acknowledging
such constraints on our understanding of texts the issue arises: to
what extent is the translation of alien cultural forms into the
categories of the interpreter possible, if at all? I strongly believe that
it is possible, and the contents of this book demonstrate some of the
pitfalls, and some of the possibilities, involved in social-scientific
readings of New Testament texts.

   The question of the relationship between 'emic' and 'etic' catego-
ries is called the problem of incommensurability.[3] Categories derived
from one social context may be incommensurable with those derived
from another. They may obscure or distort meaning. This is evident

---

[2] The terminology 'emic' and 'etic' is derived from anthropologists' appropria-
tion and adoption of the label from linguists. It owes its origins to the phonetic–
phonemic distinction: see R. Feleppa, 'Emics, Etics, and Social Objectivity',
CA 27/3 (June 1986), 243. This terminology, however, is the subject of debate
within anthropology. One concern is the danger of excessive rigour in the
elaboration of question sets so that inquirers are blinded and attribute platonistic,
alien, rigid formal structures to social realities that are less structured and more
fluid, 244. C. Geertz, 'From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of
Anthropological Understanding', in *Meaning in Anthropology* (ed. K. Basso and
H. Sleby; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), pp. 221–37,
notably has misgivings about the terminology and prefers the contrast
'experience–near' and 'experience–distant'. Also, P. Craffert, 'Is the Emic-etic
Distinction a Useful Tool for Cross-cultural Interpretation of the New
Testament?', *RelTh* 2/1 (1995), 14–37.
[3] See S. R. Garrett, 'Sociology of Early Christianity', *ABD* VI, p. 93. Also,
A. Pennycook, 'Incommensurable Discourses?', *ApL* 15/2 (1994), 115–38, who, from
the perspective of applied linguistics, uses the problem of incommensurability
as a metaphor for the problematic theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis.
There are strong parallels with his understanding of theoretical movements in his
discipline and those identified in this book. His advocacy of a (later) Foucauldian
understanding of discourse analysis may hold potential for biblical interpretation
and merits attention in another context.

in contemporary contexts and can be seen where the language of the business school is imported unmediated into the voluntary sector, with distorting and sometimes negative results. The distance between a first-century agrarian society, i.e. a postulated context for New Testament texts, and the contemporary interpreter is far greater than that which lies between contemporary private and voluntary sectors. The greater this distance, combined with the limited array of first-century cultural artefacts, the greater the challenge for the contemporary interpreter. Two explicit approaches to this challenge are currently in vogue in New Testament studies: 'Modelling' and 'Interpretivist' strategies. These broadly reflect debates within the social sciences that focus on the relationship between the individual social agent and the contexts they may inhabit, social structures.

The 'Modelling' strategy has been vigorously promoted by members of the Context Group of scholars, e.g. Bruce Malina.[4] Its methods have recently been defended by Philip Esler in a series of articles in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.[5] The strategy derives its theoretical underpinning from Berger and Luckmann, who have argued that reality is a social construct, such that both the knowledge of the interpreter and that of those examined are constrained by their historical social experiences.[6] The social worlds which we inhabit are therefore deemed to be discernible, i.e. stable, so that it is possible to reconstruct 'normative social values' and 'social locations' and produce the sort of 'models' necessary for cross-cultural analysis and thereby facilitate understanding.[7] Whilst the problem of incommensurability is understood to be profound, it is

[4] See B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (revised edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993). For a succinct discussion of the work and outlook of the Context Group, see D. G. Horrell, *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), pp. 13f., and their webpages: http://www.serv.nt/~oakmande/index.html.

[5] 'Models in New Testament Interpretation: A Reply to David Horrell', *JSNT* 78 (2000), 107–13.

[6] P. Berger and T. Ludemann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966); see also G. Ritzer, *Sociological Theory* (4th edn; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), pp. 215f. for a brief discussion of this book's influence and antecedents.

[7] 'Social location' refers to all the factors that influence a person or group, their socialisation, experiences, rationality, and views of reality. For a full theoretical treatment, see R. L. Rohrbaugh, ' "Social Location of Thought" as a Heuristic Construct in New Testament Study', *JSNT* 30 (1987), 103–19, and for its application, 'The Social Location of the Markan Audience,' *Int* 47 (1993), 380–95. Rohrbaugh's application is, however, ultimately a disappointment: having provided clarity in the use of the term 'social location' he renders the term redundant with a focus on the Lenskis' 'social level' and an undifferentiated use of the social term 'class'.

argued that it may also be overcome by modelling the social location of contemporary agrarian societies, which have a greater cultural affinity with the first century. In particular, members of the Context Group stress that biblical texts should be read as products of a 'pre-industrial advanced agrarian society of the circum-Mediterranean region',[8] that is a 'viciously agonistic, group-orientated and honour-obsessed culture of finite goods'.[9] This modelling of normative social values, combined with an 'abductive' strategy of working from evidence to hypothesis in a back-and-forth movement of suggestion checking, is presented as a means to circumvent the problem of incommensurability.[10] However, modelling is about discerning typical patterns, which are liable to become, if they have not already, caricatures or stereotypes which may interfere with understanding rather than illuminate it.[11] This is a theme that is extensively developed in the following chapter and throughout this book.

The 'Interpretivist' strategy has most recently been restated by David Horrell in dialogue with Philip Esler.[12] Horrell, following

[8] J. H. Elliott, 'Social-scientific Criticism of the New Testament: More on Methods and Models', *Semeia* 35 (1986), 49, citing G. Lenski, J. Lenski, and P. Nolan, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology* (6th edn; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1991), and G. Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City, Past and Present* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

[9] P. F. Esler, 'Review: The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence (Horrell)', *JTS* 49/1 (April 1998), 259f.

[10] See J. H. Elliott, *Social Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 48, citing L. Woodson, *A Handbook of Modern Rhetorical Terms* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979), p. 1. This methodological approach is strikingly similar to that of C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1983), p. 69, who suggests that the interpreter achieves a conjunction of emic and etic categories by 'Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it'.

[11] D. G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 287–9.

[12] D. G. Horrell, 'Models and Methods in Social-scientific Interpretation: A Response to Philip Esler', *JSNT* 78 (2000), 83–105. Whilst not personally adopting the term he places himself firmly, by implication, within the Interpretivist camp. This identification was accepted as appropriate in my own conversation with Horrell at the British New Testament Conference, Manchester, 2001. There is, however, a problem with locating Horrell. He published with many members of the Context Group in Esler's social-scientific volume *Modelling Early Christianity: Social Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (London: Routledge, 1995). In his own *The Social Ethos*, pp. 26–32, he describes his approach as 'socio-historical'. He suggests that if the dimension of time is added to the sociological approach, the distinction between sociology and history is effectively removed. More recently, though, Horrell appears ambivalent about surrendering the label 'scientific' to the model users and wishes to identify his more Interpretivist approach as equally if not more scientific: see 'Models and Methods'.

Anthony Giddens' critique of Berger and Luckmann, stresses the primacy of human agency.[13] Giddens views the structural properties of social systems, i.e. normative values, as both the medium and the outcome of practices that constitute those systems. Social structures are therefore deemed to have only a virtual existence, existing only in so far as they are reproduced and transformed by acting human subjects. Horrell, as a result of these insights, wishes to rehabilitate the individual's capacity for social transformation. Therefore, he does not seek to model a 'social location', which would emphasise a common structural position within a social system, and thereby limit the range of experience open to an individual; rather, his focus is on the 'social ethos' or 'life-style' expressed.[14] These are more general, practice-orientated, and aesthetic categories, which leave space for the transformational dimension of embodied meaning. The 'Interpretivist' approach to the problem of incommensurability may be characterised as seeking to overcome the interpreter's distance from any text's context of origin, by 'tacking between the most local of detail and the most global of structure in a continuous dialectical process', which brings both into simultaneous view, whilst keeping the transformative dimension of socially embodied meaning always in mind.[15] However, Giddens' critique of Berger and Luckmann, which emphasises the recursive character of social life and gives primacy to human agency, so that social structures have only a virtual existence, obscures the relations of individuals to social structures which repeated empirical studies suggest order people's lives.[16] In addition, when reading the New Testament we are dealing with ancient texts, where the quest for any real knowledge about the various particularities of social

[13] A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1979), pp. 69f. See also Horrell's extensive discussion in his *The Social Ethos*, pp. 45–53.

[14] Following C. Geertz, 'Ethos, World View and the Analysis of Sacred Texts', *AntRev* 17 (1957), 421, and L. E. Keck, 'On the Ethos of Early Christians', *JAAR* 42/3 (September 1974), 440, who links 'ethos' with 'life-style'.

[15] Garrett, 'Sociology', pp. 91ff., following Geertz, *Local*, p. 69.

[16] D. Layder, *Understanding Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 140f. and 218f., argues cogently that the layers of society are more durable than Giddens acknowledges. There is a 'depth' ontology to society which his structuration theory tends to flatten out: see also Ritzer, *Theory*, pp. 533f., and M. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

practice is an extreme challenge, given the paucity of evidence.[17] Preoccupation with the particular may result in a failure to produce the interpretative framework necessary for the sort of cross-cultural analysis which New Testament interpretation requires.[18]

How, then, do we address the problem of incommensurability? The first stage is to acknowledge that whilst differences exist in the approaches of Modellers and Interpretivists, striking and helpful similarities are also evident which are frequently obscured by the adversarial rhetoric that has framed much of the methodological debate to date.[19] For example, the Modellers' 'abductive' strategy clearly resonates with the Interpretivists' 'continuous dialectical process'. In addition, they both emphasise the limitations of their approaches and ultimately surrender their results to the critical scrutiny of their peers. The second stage is to recognise that the debate within the social sciences has moved on. It is now widely regarded as a multi-paradigm science which focuses on both social structures and social actors with correspondingly divergent theoretical positions;[20] and even the relative analytical comfort of these positions is being challenged by appeals for a more integrated social paradigm.[21] It is this latter position that I wish to advocate as the most fruitful for conceiving social worlds as we seek to address the

[17] Meggitt suggests that it is an impossible one: see *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), pp. 39f.

[18] Esler, *Modelling*, p. 6, following P. Descola, 'Societies of Nature and the Nature of Society', in *Conceptualising Society* (ed. A. Kuper; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 108.

[19] E.g. B. Malina, 'The Received View and What it Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality', *Semeia* 35 (1986), 171–94, which is a polemical attack on 'social history'.

[20] R. Friedrichs, *A Sociology of Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1970), has identified prophetic and priestly paradigms; the prophetic viewing themselves as agents of social change and the priestly viewing themselves as 'value-free' scientists. More recently Ritzer, *Theory*, pp. 637–42, has suggested a threefold conception of sociology: the social-facts paradigm, focusing on structures; the social-definition paradigm, focusing on actors; and the social-behaviour paradigm, focusing on unconscious behaviour.

[21] Notably by Ritzer, *Theory*, pp. 642ff., who identifies the major levels of sociological analysis as the macro-objective, the macro-subjective, the micro-objective, and the micro-subjective. These clearly resonate with the work of D. Layder, *Modern Social Theory: Key Debates and New Directions* (London: UCL Press, 1997), pp. 19ff., who advocates a theory of 'social domains' with which to conceive the social world: 'contextual resource', 'social setting', 'situated activity', and 'psycho-biography'. Also, 'habitus' and 'field' in the work of P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R. Nice; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and its application in S. B. Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 11f., who in this ethnographic history talks of 'structure', 'actor', 'history', and 'practice'.

problem of incommensurability. It is clear that social 'structures' are a significant element of any social world; a social world is made up of cultural norms and values.[22] In addition, a social world is made up of 'actors', who, whilst constrained by cultural norms and external material limits, may still act upon rational interests.[23] Furthermore, the social world is 'practised': human agency is not neutral, but occurs in a context of power interests. 'Practice' emerges from, reproduces, and transforms structure. It is a measure of conformity or non-conformity to social norms. Finally, social worlds have 'histories' made up of both external forces, impinging upon the political economy of society, and internal dynamics, which may mediate, reinterpret, and transform such forces. Any reconstructed social world cannot be adequately understood by giving primacy to either agency or structure. It is more adequately conceived of as being made up of structures, actors, practice, and histories. It is necessary to give due consideration to each of these elements and their interrelatedness, as we seek to imagine the social worlds of texts, in order to avoid the dangers of either stereotyping or losing oneself in an alien world.

2   Social structures and religious aspirations

What working with a more integrated view of the social world means in practice is developed in the following chapters, the first of which presents a critical revision of the model of a normative Mediterranean honour culture which has been proposed and applied in interpretation by members of the Context Group. This revision differs from recent criticisms, which have predominantly focused on Greco-Roman social material, e.g. the work of Gerald Downing.[24] The critique not only addresses such source material but also engages in substantive and methodological criticisms of the

---

[22] This understanding of 'structure' is consciously closer to Giddens' 'structural dualism' than Malina's understanding of structure, which privileges the constraining and ordering side of 'structure'. It is an understanding that desires to acknowledge the dynamic realities of structure, structure as conflicting discourses, not simply ordering principles.

[23] To think of actors as entirely cultural products, as Modellers appear at times to do, generates the danger that they become merely the inverse of the overly Westernised actor: see A. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–22.

[24] *Making Sense in (and of) the First Christian Century* (JSNTS 197; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

anthropological literature used. It highlights how this structural view has unnecessarily homogenised the social world and obscured cultural and historical diversity, especially the anomalous character of Judaea. In addition, it demonstrates how methodological assumptions underlying the approach preclude the identification of the religious and moral dimensions of the social world. In contrast, the critical revision demonstrates the utility of a hermeneutical strategy that seeks a more integrated view of the social world, by revealing the prominence of the religious social actor at the liminal interface of values and practices. It also reveals that in such contexts the presence of such actors has a significant impact on perceptions of poverty and gender.

These insights are built upon in chapter 3, which introduces resources from the social sciences not previously drawn into the interpretation of New Testament texts that help us to understand the role of the religious actor in their social world. In the process it exposes a theoretical legacy within the sociology of religion that has either totally assimilated such actors within, or marginalised them from, their social worlds. This pattern is shown to be repeated in discussions of the ascetic in the New Testament. In response, recent comparative studies of 'virtuoso religion', i.e. forms of piety that may lead to the establishment of religious orders, are introduced. 'Virtuoso religion' is a category, first formulated by Weber, to differentiate particular forms of religiosity from 'mass religion'.[25] The concept has recently been the subject of significant revision by Silber, following Hill, which has taken due consideration of the sociology of religion's tendency either to assimilate or to marginalise such actors.[26] Their descriptions of forms of virtuoso practice provide a means of discussing and discriminating between the possible roles and potential significance of such actors within their social worlds which neither assimilates nor marginalises them. This material reveals the potential for such actors, in particular social conditions, to have a disproportionate impact on their social worlds. These conditions appear to resonate significantly with

[25] M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (trans. T. Parsons; London: Methuen & Co., 1963), pp. 162–5.
[26] I. Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and M. Hill, *The Religious Order: A Study of Virtuoso Religion and its Legitimation in the Nineteenth-century Church of England* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

first-century Judaea. The validity of 'virtuoso religion' as a heuristic construct is then tested by scrutinising this apparent resonance. These discussions not only confirm structural parallels but also highlight the presence of virtuoso religion in the practices of the Essenes and other pietists, which notably offered cultural resources that radically addressed the situation of the poor within their social world, a piety of poverty. This scrutiny helps reveal a distinct Judaean, as opposed to Mediterranean, social world that is highly suggestive for our understanding of both the New Testament 'poor' and the Johannine traditions. These become the focus of chapters 4 and 5.

3   The 'poor'

Before applying the insights which the discussion of virtuoso religion provides, chapter 4 starts by reviewing recent social approaches to the identity of the New Testament's 'poor'.[27] These are shown to place such a stress on the social and economic dimensions of the social world that its religious dimension is obscured. In contrast, the heuristic potential of virtuoso religion is demonstrated, by reference to a survey of the *ptōchoi*, the 'poor', in the New Testament. In this context an *excursus* on the first beatitude, i.e. makarism (Matt. 5:3/Luke 6:20), demonstrates how a more broadly conceived view of the New Testament world, which accommodates cultural diversity, proves a valuable heuristic aid and suggests the inversion of the commonly held view of Lucan 'originality'. This analysis of the *ptōchoi* moves beyond the socio-economic categories of previous social approaches and draws attention to their pious practices and the predominantly Judaean location for these traditions. It is argued that these features are most credibly understood against the backdrop of the particular Judaean social world presented, as opposed to any normative Mediterranean honour culture.

---

[27] This review examines: L. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (trans. J. O'Connell; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); B. Malina, 'Interpreting the Bible with Anthropology: The Case of the Poor and the Rich', *Listening* 21 (1986), 148–59, and P. Hollenbach, *Defining Rich and Poor Using the Social Sciences* (SBL Seminar Papers; ed. Kent Richards; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 50–63.

4   Transcending Johannine sectarianism

The preceding discussion of virtuoso religion and the Judaean poor has prepared the ground for a re-examination of the popular social thesis that the Johannine literature's distinctiveness may be accounted for by reference to its sectarian origins.[28] Chapter 5 of this book starts by revealing a number of critical problems with this sectarian identification, not least of which is the Gospel's marked tension between insularity from and involvement in the world, e.g. 17:15–18. It argues that if a social thesis is to be advanced as an explanation for the Gospel's literary distinctiveness, it must take seriously its social witness. This witness has been paradoxically neglected in 'social' readings, which have suppressed the Gospel's distinctive Judaean focus with their reconstructions of community history. However, when this social world is illustrated by reference to the Gospel's idiosyncratic presentation of the *ptōchoi* and women, the relevance of the Judaean context is clear. The Gospel's presentation is more convincingly understood in terms of Judaea's indigenous forms of virtuosity, a social form that may indicate distinctive perceptions of poverty and gender, than it is by some late-first-century social schism. Indeed, the virtuoso's unique potential to form an alternative structure within society at large, which distinguishes it from other social forms such as a sect, is shown to help illuminate the very features that unsettle the sectarian reading, i.e. the Gospel's evident tension between insularity and involvement with the world is a defining feature of virtuoso religion. This social scenario, which takes seriously the Gospel's social witness, renders the sectarian thesis redundant by accounting for the Johannine distinctiveness in terms of its origins within the context of Judaea's indigenous virtuosity.

[28] E.g. J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), and W. Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), 44–72.