Introduction

In a later session we’ll bring together much of our discussion from the previous few sessions related to more hermeneutical theory, concerning author historical centered approaches, text centered approaches, and more reader centered approaches including deconstructionism. We’ll bring that all together and consider how we might implement that into an evangelical approach to hermeneutics and interpretation and how those methods might be integrated and implemented. But what I want to do in this session is move on to begin to discuss a number of other methodologies related to hermeneutics and interpretation.

Sociological Criticism: Introduction

Today we’ll begin by looking at sociological criticism or what is sometimes called social scientific approaches to interpreting the Old and New Testaments. Actually these approaches are in some respects too broad of a field at least for me to master and too broad of a field to be treated in much detail here, so I can only hope to introduce you to some of the very broad contours of sociological approaches and social scientific approaches to the Old and New Testaments. In some measure sociological approaches grew out of discontent with other methods of interpretation. When we consider sociological approaches or scientific criticism, it’s important to understand that scholars have identified at least two areas or two different approaches to sociological criticism. Number one is investigating the social background of biblical texts and the history of the biblical text. In this way, this approach has a lot of overlap with some of the traditional historical critical approaches that we already talked about. But there is a second area or avenue of approached to social areas or sociological criticism is the application of modern sociological models. This approach takes entire models and the wholesale application of those models to biblical text or sections of biblical text to explain what is going on. As I said, the field is too broad and at least my expertise is too limited to go
into a lot of detail about this approach but again I want to whet your appetite and at least
give you an idea what it is and how it might be useful.

There are numerous books that can aid one in exploring the social dimensions of
the Old and New Testament texts. Books that are entitled Sociological Criticism or Social
Scientific approaches to interpreting Old and New Testament texts. But let me just briefly
look at two different facets of sociological criticism again that is exploring the social
background of the biblical text and then the second one exploring the wholesale
application of entire sociological models especially modern sociological theories and
modern sociological studies to biblical text. I’ll just give some examples of how that has
been done.

Social Backgrounds

So first of all looking at the social background of biblical texts. This area, in many
respects, could fall under, when considering the methods of interpretation, the broader
umbrella of historical approaches to the Old New testament, where you examine the
history behind the text with the historical references within the text. Part of that could be
looking at the social background and the social dimensions of an Old or New Testament
text. That’s precisely what this method does. It looks at the social background or the
social dimensions referred to either explicitly or implicitly within the text. It seeks to
uncover the social structures or the social values in the ancient biblical world. Again
looking at the social dynamics implicit or explicit in the biblical text that would make a
difference in the way we read it and interpret it. Obviously, this then would function or is
meant to shed light on understanding and interpreting the text.

The difficulty though is that for most of us, this might not be true of all cultures or
many cultures including my own. The difficulty is that our culture and the social values
and dynamics that we operate with are at times very different from and distant from the
social values and dynamics of the ancient biblical world. A very simple example is that
the ancient world valued the communal over the individual. It valued the group or the
family unity or the community that one belonged to, which makes it difficult for persons
living in highly individualistic societies or societies where it’s acceptable or appropriate to isolate one’s self and where the emphasis is on who a person is as an individual and what they have achieved as an individual. When one reads a biblical text sometimes that can create a barrier in understanding a society that socially valued the community, so that more important than who you were as an individual was the group that you belonged to. So sometimes this gap between our world and the world of the ancient text can provide a barrier.

It is necessary then to try to come to grips with what might have been the social values and the social dynamics and the social background that is implicitly or explicitly referred to or lies behind the biblical text in order to try to understand it more clearly.

In fact, as some who apply sociological analysis to the text, especially evangelical scholars have recognized this is necessary like in an in analogy with the person of Jesus Christ, who was God incarnate in a world governed by social values. So the fact that Jesus was god incarnate in a specific social context, in a historical context means then that it is incumbent on us to investigate or to pursue an incarnational, as some would describe it, view of hermeneutics where we ask the question of the sociological context that would’ve produced the biblical text. The assumption again that I’m operating with is that we want to understand the text on its own terms in its historical and in its sociological context in light of what was shared between the ancient authors and ancient readers to whom he wrote. Therefore we must become familiar with the ancient Near Eastern world or the Greco-Roman world and again the social dynamics, the social values, that would’ve governed the way that they lived life and that it is now reflected in the text of the Old and New Testaments and how that might make a difference in the way we interpret the text especially if we’re prone to read it in light of our own social values and our own social context.

**Examples of Sociological Criticism: Kinship**

So what I want to do is give you handful of examples very briefly of how social values in particular or social dynamics that is how persons relate to each other, how they
view life, how their relationship in life is governed in society and the culture in which they live and how that might make a difference in the way one reads biblical text. For example, and as I said one can there are a number of tools at your disposal that help you to come to grips with some of the sociological backgrounds of the Old and New Testament text, but to give you just a few handful of examples: as we already said one of the important and key sociological dimensions or values of the biblical world was the focus not on the individual, but on the group to which one belonged. So as I said what was most important was not who you were as an individual or what you accomplished as an individual but the family that you belonged to or the group that you belonged to or the community that you belonged to. So that often family belonging and loyalty often were prized above everything else. Again we here at least in my own north American context often see a very distinct difference where sometimes family loyalty or sometimes fragmented families are often the norm and there’s often a tie between family members or family units, but in the ancient world especially the Greco-Roman world the family unit would’ve been valued above many or most all other relationships. Reading the texts in this way, one then finds statements such as this one made by Jesus rather that was shocking and challenging at least to the ancient reader probably read this text and yet most of us don’t think much about it, but I’m convinced the ancient hearers, those that heard Jesus say this, and those that then read the text would have found this rather shocking maybe even offensive. In Mark 3, and there are other examples of this in the parallel accounts and in the other Synoptics, but I’ll look at Mark 3:31ff through the end of the chapter verse 35. Applying the categories of form criticism this is an example of a pronouncement story where the climactic statement seems to be the key feature of the text. But listen to what the author, of the story tells, “then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived” and immediately for those who are tuned to the sociological dimension of the ancient world already recognize an important sociological dimension taking place. Jesus’ own mother and brothers, his family unit, now arrived, “Standing outside, they send someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him and they told him, ‘your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’” We might not think that’s unusual, but again
in this context that prized the family unit it was a crucial statement. Then Jesus responds, “Who are my mother and my brothers? he asked.” To which question most would’ve answered by emphasizing ones physical lineage, one’s physical familial ties, and the physical family unit. But what Jesus says in response to this question is very, in a sense, counter cultural. “Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and my mother.’” That again is rather shocking because Jesus has in a sense redefined family to include not specifically those who are of flesh and blood relationship or physical lineage, but now Jesus defines it as anyone who “does the Father’s will.” So Jesus defines the family unit in a way that is not physical, but spiritual. I think that is rather shocking perhaps even offensive though not to us but at least many first century readers.

This emphasis on the family unit as a key sociological value of the first century may also explain instances such as what we find in the text such as Acts 16, where entire household units would often respond to the gospel and often the saving message of Jesus Christ. Acts chapter 16 verses 14 and 15: “One of those listening was a woman from Lydia, a dealer in a purple in purple from the city in Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized she invited us to her home.” So notice that that intriguing reference that it wasn’t just Lydia but the entire household was converted and then baptized. This is probably a little more easily understandable though there are obviously theological issues and explanations at least at the sociological level. This is more explicable in terms of the emphasis on the family unit as a key and significant communal unit in the first century Greco-Roman world.

This is probably also reflected in Paul’s statement in chapter 1 Timothy 3:15, where he actually, as an example of the author of a letter, tells us exactly why he’s writing it. 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15 Paul says, I’ll back up and read verse 14, “Although I hope to come to you soon I am writing you these instructions so that if I’m delayed you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household [or
in the household of God], so even the church.” Frequently, Paul compares, that is, he portrays the church in terms of a family unit that has ties just as close as a physical one. Paul expects that they will show the same concern and care for each other and the same support that one would in a physical family unit with the physical kinship ties. So that’s the one social value that seems to be important in the Old and New Testament, that is, the emphasis on the group that one belonged to. I think that the phrase no person is an island or no man is an island, was certainly true in the biblical world because more important than who you were as an individual or what you accomplished as an individual was what group you belonged to. Especially the family unit and the kinship ties were a crucial social value.

**Honor/Shame Cultures**

Another important social value was that of honor/shame. Particularly in the New Testament values of the honor/shame and what that means is you were expected to avoid shame at all costs. You were expected to avoid bringing shame upon yourself by acting in a way that was acceptable and honorable. If your honor was lost you were to act in a way that restored that.

So, for example, to go back to a parable that we’ve already spent some time on, in Luke chapter 15, is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We’ve already suggested a couple of features of the parable that are intriguing. In my opinion, it can be understood clearly as operating according to the honor/shame dimensions of the first century. That is when the son asks the father for his inheritance, he is actually shaming the father. Some have said it was equivalent to wishing the father was dead because upon his death the son would receive his inheritance. So the son was acting in a way that brings shame upon the father. Furthermore, as I suggested perhaps the setting for this parable is not on some farm out in the middle of nowhere but is in a typical ancient Middle Eastern town and village where everyone would’ve been observing and would’ve seen what had happened. So it’s interesting that not only does the son bring dishonor on the father by asking for his inheritance, but the way the father acts by running out which a father did not do and grieving over his son who had treated him this way, the father further risks his honor and
risked his reputation and standing in society. His very reputation is at stake and he actually brings shame upon himself by acting in this very shameful manner.

To give another example in the Gospels, you frequently find Jesus especially towards the end of the Gospels, you see Jesus entering into debates or disputes with the religious leader whether the Sadducees or the Pharisees or different Jewish authorities. And often this takes place in terms of the Jewish authorizes asking Jesus a question to trap him and most likely what is going on when they asked Jesus a question it’s not simply because they have a problem they want solved or that they’re simply looking for information or to see if Jesus can relay an answer to the question though that could be part of it. Most likely by asking a question in this way they’re challenging Jesus’ honor. They’re trying to bring shame upon Jesus in a culture that works with the honor or shame dynamic. When Jesus often responds by asking a question back that is taunting it may be to bring shame upon his opponents. So sometimes Jesus being questioned about a different biblical text or about a conundrum they present. For example, if a woman marries several times and all her husband’s die whose husband’s wife will she be in the resurrection. Questions such as that are all meant to again not just trip Jesus up a little. Although they do that to put him on the spot, they are probably trying to challenge his honor and bring shame upon him. Again, as I said, Jesus often does that in reverse by questioning his opponents.

In Revelation 2 and 3 the seven messages to the seven churches that provide the backdrop and the context for the writing of Revelation. You often see John speaking the words of Jesus or recording the wordings of Jesus to the seven churches. You find Jesus using terms referring to his opponent such as “Jezebel” an Old Testament text or “the synagogue of Satan,” terms such as that. One of the things among others that those terms might do is function to bring shame upon the opponents in an honor/shame society. There’s a number of other examples that we could give, that biblical authors might be working with the honor/shame dynamic. That is the idea that one must act in a way that brings honor and avoid acting in ways that bring shame upon him.
**Malina and other Sociological perspectives**

Another rather interesting, and I’ll just touch on it rather briefly sociological dimension was expounded most clear prominently by a New Testament scholar that has perhaps more than any other has applied sociological study and analysis to New Testament, is an individual named Bruce Malina. Malina developed what he called the theory of limited goods and what he said that especially when it comes to wealth. Wealth existed in a limited amount that was if someone has wealth and money it was at the expense of someone else, if someone had money someone else did not. We have a saying sometimes you hear a saying in North American English that “there’s more where that came from.” In first century with the theory of limited goods, the statement could be revised, “there’s no more where that came from.” But just simply this understanding of a theory of limited goods would probably explain the resentment of the poor towards the wealthy that you see reflected several times in the New Testament texts and even in the Greco-Roman world more broadly.

**Patron-client Relationship**

The last sociological value that I want to discuss is a one that has been recognized by a number of New Testament scholars and a number of them have picked up on it and utilized it to explain what is often going on in biblical text. That is, what is known as the system of patronage or the patron-client relationship in the ancient world. That seems to have been very prevalent in the Greco-Roman world and seems to lie behind a number of texts. The patron-client relationship to be real simplistic, was a patron who was someone who was well to do financially, who was of an elite social status, and who has financial means. This person would often enter into a relationship with a client. A client was someone who was poor, who was not so well off, who was probably very poor and on the lower rung on the social economic status. What the patron would do was to enter into a relationship with the client and bestow benefits on the client, financially or otherwise perhaps providing them with work, or other ways of providing help in exchange for the client’s political support. The only appropriate response of the client was to go around
and basically in society say how wonderful this patron was. So we might say that when it comes to today when it comes time to vote and everyone knows who to vote for. But the client then would sing the praises of the patron and provide them with political support et cetera in exchange for his support and gratitude. Ingratitude for what the patron had done or to fail to respond appropriately to fail to respond with gratitude was a serious breach of this relationship and a serious breach of this social dynamic. In one sense some have suggested that God himself is portrayed in the Old and New Testaments as the ultimate patron who bestows benefits on the people and they are to respond in gratitude. But this patron-client relationship seems to lie behind a number of issues in a book like 1 Corinthians. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10 Paul includes a section where he refuses the financial support of the Corinthians even though he has the right to receive the financial support as an apostle and even though he received financial support as other churches such as the Philippians and probably the church in Rome and some others. When it came to the Corinthians, he refused their financial support and some of that maybe because of the patron-client relationship dynamic. He wanted to avoid confusion in accepting their financial support and there’s other things going on as well.

I think another dynamic in the Corinthian society would’ve been traveling philosophers and teachers of wisdom who would’ve gathered a following that would’ve been competition. They would’ve paid philosophers, these traveling teachers, for their services. So Paul wants to avoid all of that, but the patron-client relationship and some of the issues relating to that might’ve been one of the reason why Paul refuses financial support in Corinth.

The way the Corinthians treated their leaders in Corinthians chapters 1 to 3, remember that statement. Paul says, “some of you say I am of Apollos, some say I am of Paul, I am of Cephas, and some say I am of Jesus.” That sort of attitude was in danger of dividing the church may owe itself to this patron-client dynamic that existed in first century Corinth.
1 Corinthians 5 and patron-client sociology

In chapter 5, there is a very interesting text in chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians. The author, Paul, deals with a man involved in incest and the church seems to be willing to tolerate that. What Paul is really upset about is not so much the man, although he’s upset at that, but the people that get excoriated for what they’re doing in the church. What really has Paul is upset is not just that the man is committing incest sleeping with his step-mother, his father’s wife, but the fact that what really has Paul bothered is that fact that the church would tolerate it. At least to us, why would anyone do such a thing? Is it possible that this man is a wealthy patron? No one wants to touch him, no one wants to call him out and that’s behind this activity because it would be inappropriate for someone who is a patron, who bestows benefits. Maybe this is a wealthy man who has the church is meeting in his home or one of the churches and he has bestowed financial benefits or certain persons. No one wants to call him out on this, so they’re quite willing to turn a blind eye and tolerate it so is it possible that the patron client type of dynamic explains why the church would be willing to tolerate this as a number of commentators on 1 Corinthians have recognized. There appears to be a number of other issues that Paul deals with in the church of Corinth that probably stem from this system of the patronage of the patron-client dynamic.

Hebrews and Philemon and Patron-Client Sociology

To give an example of another book in the New Testament. A scholar named David DeSilva had argued that the book of Hebrews depends on the patron system and the patron-client type of dynamic, especially the warning passages he interprets in light of this. He thinks what is going on is that the readers are in danger of refusing to demonstrate thankfulness and refusing to demonstrate gratitude to someone, God, who has bestowed so many benefits salvifically on them. For the readers to refuse that in an internal way would be to identify them as a client who refuses to acknowledge and be grateful for and to show gratitude for the patron had done and the gracious gift the patron has given him. So Desilva analyzes much of the book of Hebrews in light of the social
dynamic of social patron-client relationship.

The letter to Philemon most likely, also, at least, partially assumes patron-client
dynamic. When you read Philemon, the very last book in the Pauline corpus, Paul writes
in a way that he expects Philemon to recognize his responsibility and the debt of gratitude
that he owes Paul. Paul seems to focus on that and utilize that as a way of getting
Philemon to follow through and take Onesimus back. Paul’s main purpose in the book is
to get Philemon to receive Onesimus back. Part of what’s going is the patron-client
system. In the patron system dynamic Paul wants, as one who has done something for
Philemon, now he wants Philemon to in turn do something for Paul and essentially return
the favor in showing gratitude for what Paul has done. So, there might be some of the
patron-client dynamic operating there as well.

More broadly and intriguingly, this seems to lie behind a number of New
Testament books, but I’m not going to focus on any one book. The whole system of
imperial rule in many respects seems to have been built on the system patronage
and the patron-client relationship. That is Caesar was seen as a patron and even beyond
Caesar sometimes the God’s, the Greco-Roman gods including the Caesar, the emperor,
was increasingly deified and given titles of deities and often worshipped along with the
pantheon on Greco-Roman gods. Often I think the emperor was viewed as along with the
other gods would’ve been viewed as the patron who had bestowed benefits such as peace,
wealth, and security upon Rome. The subjects of Rome were clients who were expected
to show gratitude towards the emperor and towards the other gods by participating in
festivals or ceremonies or opportunity to do that. You can begin to see how this might
create difficulties and especially for the New Testament authors to try and get readers not
to participate in what they saw as participation in pagan religious worship and
compromising their relationship with Jesus Christ and the exclusive worship that
belonged to God and Christ. Many of them operating under the system under patronage
and may have seen it as unthinkable breach of social values that one would not show
gratitude towards the emperor for all that he bestows. So when you go to work and you
get a pay check but that is not necessarily how it happened. Whether there was a fruitful
crop or the wealth they had or the job they had, they owed a debt of gratitude towards their patron the emperor and also the Greco-Roman gods for bestowing that upon them. It would be a serious breach not to show gratitude, for example, at opportunities to express worship.

So in that context sometimes New Testament authors have to wrestle with an important social code and must call readers to sometimes disentangle themselves or disassociate themselves from situations where they’re called upon to show gratitude and honor to their patron, the emperor or the Greco-Roman gods. So at times looking at the Old and New Testaments from through the lenses of the social values and the social dynamics of the ancient world through sociological criticisms can be of value as it overlaps with more traditional concerns of studying the history in the text. So that it’s important then to be alert to the sociological world that is referred to implicitly or explicitly within the biblical text. One final interesting example, and we’ve already referred to this a little bit, when we talked about the character in narrative. In John chapter 8:44 when Jesus calls the Pharisees that he’s in dispute with, when he says, “you are of you father the devil.” That is in again a sociological dynamic. It draws on the notion of kingship ties related to the idea of family. That is who you belong to your familiar origin is reflected in your character and in your own life. So that is the way the Pharisees were treating Jesus in refusing to believe the truth and by wanting to kill him in John chapter 8. Jesus now demonstrates and tells them that they are actually demonstrating their true image, their true kinship ties. They belong to their father the devil. He himself is a murderer and he himself is the teller of lies. So there’s all kind of insight to begin by looking at the sociological background of Old and New Testament texts. As I said there are a number of helpful books. There’s a series on the whole social-rhetorical approach that are often sensitive to the sociological dynamic of biblical texts and can provide new fresh insight into how we understand the text. They provide a welcome corollary and addition to our traditional historical approaches to the background of the biblical text. But we said beyond studying the historical background of the text is the application of sociological models usually modern based sociological models to
biblical texts. There are theories about human behaviors and insights from modern day sociological models that are applied wholesale to entire texts or sections of biblical texts in order to shed fresh light on understanding those texts.

Again, let me just give you a couple of examples of scholars who have applied sociological models to explain what’s going on in the biblical text. My purpose is not to agree with them or evaluate them or to disagree with them, but just to give you examples on what’s been done and how that works is very quickly.

**Old Testament Sociological Approaches**

In the Old Testament, one of the most well-known examples that most people refer to, to illustrate a sociological interpretation of the Old Testament centers around Israel as a nation and also the rise of their monarchy. A number have tried to explain the rise of Israel, particularly the conquest of Canaan, the settlement in the land, the rise of the nation of Israel or how the monarchy and the kingship arose trying to explain that by using sociological models. For example, one Old Testament scholar named Norman Gottwald suggested and developed a theory that explained Israel’s origin that is often called the origin “a peasant revolt” for understanding Israel’s conquest. He says basically what happens instead of a more nomadic model of Israel entering the land, what you had have are disenfranchised peasants who are oppressed by the Canaanite elite and the hierarchical society of Canaan and now they’ve revolted against that and were wanting to create a more egalitarian society. So he now uses the theory of peasant revolt to explain to explain the conquest narratives in the Old Testament.

**Apocalyptic Genre and Sociological Criticism**

Also considering very broadly again in the Jewish world, apocalyptic literature including books like the book of Daniel in particular and other Jewish apocalypses, I think we referred to Enoch before, but we’ll turn back to this kind of literature when we talk about genre criticism later on. But a two volume work by an individual named James Charlesworth called the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* the first volume incudes a collection of English translations of most of the early Jewish and some of the early
Jewish Christian apocalyptic literature. It basically records the visionary experience of an individual who ascends to heaven or through a dream or visionary type of experience they see visions of heaven or the heavenly world or hell. Sometimes they go on journeys and see different locations sometimes they see the future, but apocalyptic literature has provided a fruitful field for sociological analysis. That is, there’s been a lot to interest in the social setting and the social dynamics that gave rise to such literature. Why would this literature be important? What sociological factors and social setting in the ancient world gave rise to this kind of a literature, these apocalyptic visionary experiences?

For example, a common understanding is that this type of literature is the literature of the marginalized and oppressed. That is, apocalyptic literature arises out of a sense of group alienation and deprivation. This is the social setting for apocalyptic literature so it arises out of a group that feels alienated and disenfranchised from society and the status quo. Apocalyptic literature then like the book of Daniel and other Jewish apocalypses or the book of Revelation is meant to address those concerns. It grows out of and it is the literature of a group that is oppressed and alienated from the rest of society. Some have even created rather elaborate theories of the emergence of this kind of literature, especially seeing it as part of emerging from the struggle, and emerging out of Old Testament prophecy. It is emerging out of the struggle between a visionary group and a group that is a priestly elite and that out of that struggle apocalyptic literature arose. So the social setting then of apocalyptic literature that engenders this type of literature is often seen to be a situation of persecution, oppression or deprivation. Furthermore this is also understood in sociological terms and there’s been a lot of debate in some of the apocalypses as to whether there’s really a specific crisis. Do apocalypses really address specific situations of oppression, persecution and crisis? One sociological model suggests that apocalypses arose in response to a perceived crisis, so the readers are not really necessarily experiencing a crisis. What is important is not whether they are objectively oppressed or persecuted, but whether they feel that way and whether they perceive it is a perceived crisis.

Now I think the last word has not yet been said on the social setting of apocalyptic
literature, but again I simply give you this as an example of a how sociology analysis can be used to try to explain the origins of a movement an apocalyptic movement or apocalyptic type of literature. In the past it has often been associated with social situations of oppression and alienation, failed expectation, and perceived crisis as the sociological setting for this type of literature. Just to mention a handful of others briefly especially related to the New Testament.

**Other New Testament Examples of Sociological Approaches**

For example, there have been a number of theories of what kind of prophet Jesus was, a number of sociological models that move across cultures and times and applied it to Jesus. Was Jesus a millenarian type of prophet that expected the end of the world? Was Jesus then seeking more to transform society? Was he a healer, a miracle worker? Was he a charismatic type of prophet? Without going into detail there have been all kinds of suggestions as to what type of prophet Jesus was and how that might help us understand who he was and what he did. There a number of theories that attempt to explain the emergence of the early church and what kind of society it was. There are a number of theories that try to explain how the church moves from a more charismatically oriented movement to a movement that was more institutional and institutionalized. A number of theories have tried to explain that. Again my intention is not to evaluate that or express agreement or disagreement, but just to give you examples of how sociological models have been used to understand the movement of early Christianity. But we will, in our conclusion, talk a little bit by way of evaluation overall.

How do we utilize these approaches? One interesting example, one sociologist John Gager, who is well known for some of his work in explaining the origins of the early church community, explained the rise of Christianity as a reaction to failed prophecy. In examining a number of other movements Gager basically said a common phenomenon in many movements is when early on the movements have to deal with failed expectations and failed prophecies. One of the ways they do this is by proselytizing and through proselytizing and evangelizing they gather a following and a group kind of
with the idea of safety in numbers. By doing that they are able to in a way save face or they are able to maintain their existence in the group and perhaps then deal with those failed expectations. So Gager tries to explain the emergence of Christianity through this understanding of a reaction to failed prophecy. Again, there are other countless theories. We’ve already mentioned a persons by the names of David DeSilva or Bruce Malina, Timothy Tyson is another important person who has written a lot on sociological analysis again taking entire models to explain the early movement of Christianity or the emergence of Israel as a nation or a monarchy or something like that.

Evaluation of Sociological Criticism

By a way of evaluation positively sociological models not only provide a sociological background but the application of models. Sociological models can provide at times valuable interpretive insight in shedding new light on the text and explaining what is going on providing new explanations for what one finds happening in the text and helping us to overcome our distance with the text.

1 Corinthians 11 [the Lord’s supper] from a Sociological Perspective

For example, in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul addresses another problem with a situation in the Corinthian church in starting with verse 17, Paul addresses a problem in the church, the Corinthian church, as they gather for worship with the way it conducts communion or the Eucharist or the Lord’s supper. In 1 Corinthians 11 starting with 17 to the end of the chapter, sociological analysis and background has actually helped shed, I think, valuable insight on that text, that the main problem is not only a theological one because often we’ve interpreted this text especially when Paul castigates the Corinthians for taking the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner. We’ve often we’ve often interpreted this text mainly along theological lines, that Paul is castigating the Corinthians for having sin in their lives by taking the Lord’s supper when they have unconfessed sin. So Paul calls on them to evaluate themselves and that is carrying over today in the way we often treat this text especially when we participate in our churches and congregations in the Eucharist or the Lord’s supper today. But as sociological explanation might actually
provide a clear avenue in understanding the whole problem in that the whole patron
dynamic or the whole wealthy and poor social dynamic is probably the main problem
lying behind the Corinthians abuse of the Lord’s supper. That is most likely as the
Corinthians participated in the communion, the Eucharist, Lord’s supper, the whole
patron-client or the whole social status between the wealthy and the poor would have
bled over and influenced the Corinthians. This whole dynamic in secular society, now
bled over into their church services and is now influencing the way that they participate
in the Lord’s supper. That is, what would have been natural for anyone living in Corinth
in this patron-client or in this society with this status between the wealthy and the more
poor members of society would have been when they sat down and ate a meal. It was
common for the wealthy to meet in the certain place in a home and to participate in more
expensive food, more appropriate food for the wealthy. Whereas, the poor members in
society those in the lower social economic status, would have met in a different location
in the house and would have eaten a poor quality of food. To add and to that perhaps you
would have had slaves serving both especially the wealthy. So the main difficulty, the
main problem Paul has is not that the Corinthians are participating in the Lord’s supper
with the wrong theological understanding or unconfessed sin in their lives, but they are
taking a meal, the Lord’s supper, the Eucharist, that should indicate and celebrate their
unity they are now participating in that in a context that further perpetuates the social
economic distinctions of the Greco-Roman society by dividing the poor and the wealthy,
having the wealthy in one location, eating the best food and the poor somewhere else
eating the lesser food. The wealthy were getting drunk and gorging themselves. So that
was the Lord’s supper that’s has Paul so upset. So when he castigates them for
participating in the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner again I’m convinced he’s
primarily aiming his comments and his rhetoric at the way the Corinthians are using the
Lord’s supper, that is, the way they are participating it in a context that reflects the
sociological dimensions of the Corinthian society where the wealthy and the poor are
distinguished by the patron-client dynamic that is going on. So when he tells them to
examine themselves it’s not so much to ask forgiveness for everything wrong they have
done its more to examine the way that they are using the Lord’s supper to create division and perpetuate social division then it is to use it to create unity and express their oneness in Jesus Christ.

A second value of this approach obviously is then that it places the Old and New Testaments once again in its historical and sociological context. As some scholars have said it’s an incarnational approach to interpreting the Bible that is all that means. It is a reminder that it grew out of a specific social historical context. These approaches can help us come to grips with that.

One of the a few of the concerns of a sociological approach especially the application of the wholesale application of sociological models particularly modern sociological models is: number one, sociological approaches to the Old and New Testaments at times have a tendency and a danger of being reductionistic. That is, it gives you the impression that the sole explanation for the text and the sole explanation for what is going on is a sociologic one and may rule out other theological and historical explanations for a situation. So, sometimes reductionistic tendencies lie behind the application of sociological models.

Another one is sort of related to that is often sociological models tend to be anti-supernatural, that is, they provide a solely natural sociological explanation while ignoring the possibility of God’s intervention into history and providing a theological explanation as well for what is going on. That leaves out explanations that would allow for divine interventions and God’s working in the midst of the people. So, for example, to provide a solely sociological explanation for the emergence of the nation of Israel while ignoring the theological dimensions and activity of God in bringing about his nation would be an example of a reductionistic approach, but also one that ignores the divine and supernatural dimension to the biblical text.

A third one is sociological models are in danger of forcing a model, especially modern models onto the Old and New Testaments. There’s nothing objectionable itself about applying modern day models to biblical texts. The problem is when they are forced onto the text, when they are actually models that do not fit the biblical text but they are
used anyway to try to explain them. Some modern sociological models may actually reflect values and situation that are very different from the ancient world. So, especially sociological models need to be continuously tested by the data of the text and what we know about the ancient world.

And finally, some models require actually require rejecting in setting aside parts of the data and parts of the biblical text in order to make the model work. So it is more appropriate I think to call for an eclectic approach that utilizes sociological models along with other models such as historical critical approaches and typical historical approaches, but also uses them as an integration with other interpretative techniques and other interpretive methods. So when used along with other historical methods, when implemented with other methods of hermeneutics and other methods of interpretation sociological criticism does have the potential to be a valuable tool to bringing fresh insight into the biblical text in helping us understand it more clearly.

Beginning with the next session we will begin to talk about another method of interpretation and that is the issue of genre criticism. How does understanding the type of literature that one’s dealing with affect the way one understands the biblical text. We’ll consider that in the next session.