Sociology and the Study of the Old Testament

Some Recent Writing

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In a recent article, Herion[1] has illustrated how modern social contexts and assumptions shape scholarly pre-understandings of what is generally true of human social life, and consequently limit the number of options available to historians in their reconstructions of the past. The assumptions which are currently operative in OT scholarship, even though they are not unquestioned in the social science context itself, are positivism (the only valid form of knowledge is objective knowledge of the kind accepted by the natural sciences), reductionism(the tendency to explain the complex in terms of the simple, as through the use of models), relativism (issues of morality and religion are never totally right or wrong in any absolute sense), and determinism (the tendency to think that human values, choices and actions are determined by certain variable in the social and cultural environment). By understanding the past within a framework formed by these categories it becomes meaningfuland relevant to a modern audience. Thus, Wilson's argument[2] that the prophet's message is an expression of the internalized values of his support group, behind whichmay be found socio-political and socio-economic concerns, reflects a relativistic and deterministic outlook; his application of the simple model of the prophet and his support group to complex data where it is inappropriate reflects positivism and reductionism in that the model becomes a historical datum rather than simply a heuristic device. In Gottwald's study[3] relativism and determinism are apparent in his treatment of Israelite religion as a projection of the economic and political interests of society. Positivism and reductionism appear in his presentation of ancient Israel as conforming to all the rules of the macro-sociological theories of Durkheim, Weber and Marx.

Herion has clearly shown that much current OT scholarship works on the basis of certain often unacknowledged cultural and philosophical assumptions.

These assumptions belong to the nature of the philosophical and sociological traditions to which Wilson and Gottwald belong or which they have used as the means best suited to their historical task.It is a tradition which has particularly close affinities with the sociological method to be traced back to Durkheim, a method which clearly reflects the characteristics isolated by Herion. At that point, however, where he presents his own criticism of the views ofWilson and Gottwald, Herion has introduced a certain confusion which has important implications for sociological method. So, Wilson's relativism and determinism are said to have the result that "the prophet's genuine sense of any 'good' transcending his social group's interests' has been effectively denied"; and it is also held that "the diminished capacity of the individual to believe autonomously in absolutes - which is characteristic of the secular, modern world - has been projected on to the world of the ancient Near East"[4]. In similar vein, Gottwald is criticized for allowing his particular social scientific understanding of religion to determine the religious understanding of the ancient Israelites themselves. The result, argues Herion, is a historical reconstruction unable to concede the Israelite peasant's ability to possess any genuine sense of good, transcending their own socio-political goals and socio-economic interests.

The particular problem with this criticism is that it confuses a modern social science understanding of the nature and function of religion with what Israelites themselves believed. Gottwald and Wilson do not intend primarily to describe what the ancient Israelites actually believed; rather, they set out to explain, with the help of sociological theory, the origin and nature of those beliefs.

In a study which relates directly to this issue, Rogerson[5] has proposed that the sociological methodology advocated by Runciman should be adopted for OT studies. According to Runciman, sociology has different aims and approaches which may be defined in terms of distinct levels. These are the levels of reportage, description and evaluation. Reportage is the gathering together of information in value free language. It is a level which

poses particular problems for the OT scholar who has so little in the way of concrete information at his disposal. OT historical reconstruction, therefore, frequently makes use of models derived from elsewhere in order to compensate for the poverty of the data yielded directly by ancient Israel. Models, however, properly belong to the level of explanation, rather than that of reportage, and the consequent inevitable risk that the twolevels will be confused, can be easily illustrated from the history of OT study as a real danger. Thus, for example, the amphictyony, intended as an analogy or model of explanation for the pre-monarchic Israel, quickly came to be accepted as a simple historical datum.

Description is concerned with what it was like to be in a particular society or situation; it can make direct use of the OT to expound what it was like to be a member of the people of Yahweh. The historical accuracy or credibility of the information provided by the OT is not at issue at this point; here the information is taken as a reflection of the beliefs and attitudes of the ancient Israelites. At this level of description religion may be described in idealist terms even when these may be inappropriate at other levels, particularly at the level of explanation. The careful distinction between thelevels of explanation and description is then one possible way of coping with the proposals of Gottwald and Wilson, while avoiding the confusion introduced by Herion's criticism.

Evaluation involves passing a moral judgment on phenomena on the basis of the observer's own values, of which, in order to avoid distortion at other levels, the observer should be constantly aware. So, the observer's preference for prophetic religion over against priestly religion, or his dislike of sacrificial ceremonial, should not determine judgments at the levels of reportage, explanation or description.

This is an attractive and at first sight persuasive method of approach. What is especially attractive about it at this point is that it avoids the so-called genetic fallacy, that is, the view that the nature, significance and truth of something is to be decided on the basis of an account of its origins. In the context of ancient Israel, it allows us to explain

the religion of Israel by reference to social and economic factors, while the question of the nature, significance and truth of that religionstill remains to be decided on the level of description.

This is, however, a refinement of sociological method involving certain presuppositions which should be explicated. In the first place, and most obviously, the isolation of a level of value-free reportage, with reference either to the reconstruction of history or to theorizing about contemporary society, presupposes an objectivism, or at least a degree of objectivism, which could be acceptable only in the most principled of positivistic and empirical contexts. Given the impossibility of reporting all phenomena, such reporting as does take place is based upon selection, and selection can be made only on the basis of explanation and evaluation. These may be unconscious procedures, but none the less real for all that: those events are reported which are important to the reporter, and that judgment is made not simply on the basis of their intrinsic significance, but more particularly on the basis of the reporter's own values, and on the basis of a synchronic and diachronic framework of explanation and causality into which those events have been fitted, a framework which, whether explicitly formulated or not, is still there. This is true of both historical sociology and of contemporary sociology.[6]

Obvious as it is, this point should be emphasized, because it relates directly to the more difficult and yet equally potentially distorting distinction between explanation and description. The distinction made here rests on a distortion which in turn rests on an underlying ideology. It is significant that explanation and description are distinct levels which are to be approached in that order. Since the level of description follows on that of explanation, the beliefs of individuals (what it was like to be a member of the people of Yahweh) are effectively excluded as causative factors, that is, as essential elements in the development of the level of explanation, and are confined to a level of description which is considered only after explanation has already been concluded. The individual is thus seen as the product of his social and economic environ-

ment, an environment which has originated for reasons quite independent of his thoughts and intentions and which in fact is the very foundation of those thoughts and intentions.

The implication of this is that Runciman's methodology is apparently a materialistic and positivistic approach; not surprisingly, it forms a good sociological theoretical framework for the proposals of Gottwald and Wilson.[7] If the method is to be criticized, such a criticism must be made in the firstinstance not on the basis of the effects of the method on the view of Israelite history and religion which results from it, but on the theoretical level of the sociological understanding of the individual and society which it presupposes.

II

In a comprehensive critique of what he refers to as naturalistic social science, because of its view that the methods and objectives of social science are more or less those of natural science, Giddens[8] has argued that the empirical areas of research in the social sciences have not yet caught up with what is happening in social theory, in that they continue to work from an old naturalistic perspective. In social theory, however, there is coming into existence a different perspective which integrates strands from English-speaking and continental philosophy. This may be seen in the emerging understanding of the nature of human action. Objectivists who stress society and institutions have failed to deal adequately with the qualities which must be attributed to human agents: self-understanding, intentionality, acting for reasons. Subjectivists, on the other hand, tend to skirt issues concerned with long term processes of change and the large scale organization of institutions. Action is not simply an aggregate of intentions; rather, it has an essential temporality which is part of its constitution and so is related to those concepts, structures and institutions which have been so important for objectivists.

Gidden argues, therefore, that the relationship between individual action and society should be

understood by analogywith Saussure's linguistic model of relationship between langue and parole. In the linguistic context, structure consists of absences and presences embedded in the instantiation of language in speech or in texts. That is to say, every act of speaking or writing presupposes,is carried out within the context of, at the same time both creates and yet is made possible by, the structure of the language, a structure which is both present and absent in every act of speaking or writing. So also in the social context, institutions and societies have structural properties in virtue of the continuity of the actions of their component members; but these members of society are able to carry out their day to day activities only in virtue of their capability of instantiating those structural properties.

Gidden[9] has proposed, therefore, that the notion of human freedom and purposeful actionshould be maintained with four qualifications. Firstly, individuals act according to the conventions of their milieu. Secondly, most of the knowledge we have of the conventions which define our actions is not only contextual, it is basically practical and ad hoc; our discourse about our actions and our reasons for them touches only on certain aspects of what we do in our day to day lives. Thirdly, our activities constantly have consequences that we do not intend and of which we might be quite oblivious when undertaking the behaviour in question; so, while as social agents we are necessarily the creators of social life, social life is at the same time not our own creation. Fourthly, the study of the intertwining of what is intended and what is not is a task of elementary importance in sociology; all action is situated in limited time-space contexts, so all of us are influenced by institutional orders that none of us intentionally established.

It is wholly in keeping with this to think in terms of the individual as one who creatively responds to his situation through the conventions available in his time. His relationship to his social structure is one of creative interdependence and interaction, and this implies that his understanding and his meaning are an integral element in the nature of the society to which he belongs. The explanation of Israelite society must,

therefore, involve the intentions and understandings of those who participated in that society. This restoration of the individual to his proper role in society opens the way to an almost overwhelming range of complex issues which then directly impinge on the sociological task. If the actor is an active participant in the creation of society, and not just the passive reflection of society, then an adequate sociology must include an adequate understanding of the individual, both biologically and psychologically. The need for this can never be disguised by all the assertions of structural fundamentalism and the rest of the naturalistic approach in sociology.

III

In at least three respects these considerations must affect our approach to the reconstruction of Israelite history, society and religion, and force a modification of some recent materialist trends.

In the first place, the materialist critique of much current history writing, as advanced by Whitelam and others[10], must be modified. This critique is aimed primarily at the "great men make history" approach, which concentrates on the great personalities and the unique eventsas the prime moversand the most significant and noteworthy elements in historical reconstruction. On the materialist theory, however, even the great personalities are pawns in a historical process over which they have no control, and it is this process which explains the unique events, rather than the other way around. The available written sources, moreover, suffer in the materialist view from these idealist distortions, and to follow them or to assign them priority is to perpetuate the illusions that the materialist approach seeks to destroy. The materialist approach, therefore, seeks to establish the priority of the non-biblical sources over against the Bible: geography, archaeology, the study of climate. These become the foundations of reliable, objective history, providing knowledge of the real causes of the historical process.

The criticism of this materialist approach must effect a readjustment in order to re-incorporate the human actor as a real cause in history. This

re-incorporation, however, must be within the parameters of the understanding of the nature of human action, sketched out by Giddens, and worked out in detail for the OT context from the information provided by biblical and non-biblical sources. History is indeed made by men, but it is made in response to given environmental conditions and through the medium of contemporary conventions. The written sources of the OT may be onesided in their emphasis on human actions, but they nevertheless record what is integral and constitutive of social situations and not just reflections of those situations. The restoration to history of the individual, even though in a modified role, implies also the restoration of the written record, even though also in qualified form.

Secondly, the last two qualifications made by Giddens to the idea of human freedom and purposeful action related to the need to distinguish between the intentional and the unintentional consequences of individual action. This can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, Giddens himself relates it to the distinction between the consequences which are intended by the actor and those unintended consequences which follow as a result of the effects of individual action within the wider social context. This is an important qualification of human freedom which is part of that integration of human action within the context of its realizing or instantiating the conventions of contemporary society. There is, however, another aspect to this distinction which is that it may be taken to relate to conscious intentions on the one hand, and to subconscious or unconscious intentions on the other. If the validity of such a distinction is admitted, and the unconscious as well as the conscious are then seen as powerful influences on individual actions, then human psychology becomes of primary importance for OT study[11]. In a limited way, theory deriving from social psychology has been fruitfully used in the elucidation of the prophets. Carroll's study of selected prophetic texts in the framework of dissonance theory has shown that "some of the hermeneutic processes evident in the prophetic traditions are indications of dissonance response;"[12] that is, the tensions between a prophecy and factors which negate it gave rise to various strategies designed to ease that tension and these are reflected in the texts. This is a good example of the positive contribution which

a more comprehensive psychological or psychoanalytical approach might make to the elucidation of Israelite history and society.

Thirdly, if the structuralist functionalist understanding of the nature of the individual is deficient and onesided, the same must also be the case with the structural functionalist understanding of religion. If men creatively respond to their environment within the framework of and realizing the conventions of their time, then their thinking, including their religious thinking, must be understood as part of their ordering activity. Religion, then, cannot be understood simply as an objectification of primary social realities, but rather as part of that process of culture formation through which men order their worlds.

Berger has argued[13] that religious phenomena cannot be understood to manifest themselves as different from human projections, since nothing is immune to the relativization of socio-economic analysis. It is only 'in, with and under' the immense array of human projections that indications of a reality that is truly other will be found. Theological thought should, then, seek out signals of transcendence within the empirically given human situations, such signals are constituted by prototypical human gestures, reiterated acts and experiences that appear to express essential aspects of man's being. These may be found in humour, in play, in hope, in absolute condemnation, in all of which the empirically given is transcended, but above all in the human propensity for order, in the belief that the created order of society corresponds to an underlying order of the universe, a divine order that supports and justifies all human attempts at ordering, a divine order in the universe in which it makes sense to trust. This argument that human projections are thus reflections of ultimate reality implies that religion is then both a human projection and at the same time not simply relative to human social and cultural conditions. It can be understood as the cultural expression of constant human dispositions and attitudes which are themselves reflections of a divine order in reality.

This is a form of understanding which finds points of

contact with psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to religion and society. It sees religion as a cultural expression of meaning bound in with the human attempt to create a meaningful universe. It has difficulty, however, in accounting for radical change and development in such meaning systems, while it shares with all such approaches the particular problem of the questionable 'necessity' for positing any ultimate reality to which these human dispositions and projections correspond.

In a study which makes significant advances on both of these questions, Theissen[14] has argued that the most appropriate way of understanding the nature of both religious and scientific thought, and the relationship between them, is within the framework of evolution. The theory of biological evolution sees organisms as having developed through mutation and selection as a means of achieving better adaptation to reality. In a parallel way, culture, expressed in science, art and religion, has developed different forms in the process of adapting to reality. Mutation in biological evolution is parallel to adaptation in cultural evolution. The difference between biological and cultural evolution is constituted by human cansciousness. This introduces into cultural evolution the possibility of adaptive change of behaviour as an alternative to elimination of unsuitable life forms which selection in the biological context implies. Within culture, both science and faith are processes of adaptation. The scientific picture of the world is not identical with reality, but is a form of adaptation to reality. Reality itself is 'other' and mysterious; behind all the phenomena we have intimations of a central reality which determines and conditions everything.

Evolutionary theory confirms that the mysterious reality to which we are related in all our structures of adaptation is a single, central reality, which discloses itself to us step by step under various aspects. So, knowledge and faith agree that behind the world which we interpret there is an intrinsic reality which we cannot yet grasp adequately, that our life is a structure of adaptation to thise reality which is partly successful, and that all attempts at adaptation relate to a single, central reality. From the rationality of our brains

it can further be argued that the reality which makes its evolution possible is itself rational. Faith is the attempt to understand the whole of life as a response to that ultimate reality.

Ultimate reality is more than a productive force; in sickness and death it also shows itself as the merciless process of selection, as that which encounters our resistance and rejection in personal and social experience. It is thus that this central reality is the 'creator' of the limited world in which we live and which takes shape in adaptation to it. Science and faith can both affirm this reality as a productive force because it calls forth from both responses which overcome its harshness. Despite their differences, these responses are both experimental attempts at adaptation to ultimate reality which came about by unplannable mutations. In science, the new paradigm, the mutation of our cognitive structures, can hardly be planned; in religion, the revelations and revealers (charismatics) in the history of religions are such mutations.

Monotheistic religion is a projection within the history of trial and error aimed at achieving an adequate adaptation to the ultimate reality. In Israel it was achieved through conflict over the exclusiveness of Yahweh in the pre-exilic period, over his uniqueness in the exilic period, and over his universality in the meeting with Hellenistic philosophical monotheism. It was not the result of a continuous development, but appeared suddenly as a spiritual mutation, a revolutionary transformation of consciousness, a mutation of our religious structures of adaptation to the ultimate reality; it is a protest against polytheism and against the values and patterns of behaviour attributed to other gods; it is always critical of society, since in polytheism the multiplicity of related gods is a reflection of a society differentiated according to the distribution of work.

Theissen's study is a major contribution to our understanding of the nature of religion, and fits well within the framework of the new understanding of the nature of human action described by Giddens. As part of the culture process of adaptation to reality,

religion has structural affinities with other cultural processes and yet some significant variations. Theissen summarizes these in a sentence which he then considerably qualifies: science works with hypotheses and the falsification principle and delights in dissent, while religion is apodictic, going against the facts and depending on consent; science is quick and direct and oriented to the future, while religion is slow and halting and oriented to the past. It is precisely this combination of difference with a common structural affinity which means that there cannot be any single and simple description of the relationship between society and religion, and also that the discussion which has priority is in the end fruitless. Society,insofar as it can be isolated as a fact to be described, is a cultural phenomenon which emerges from a conglomerate of factors; among these both scientific knowledge and faith as interrelated humn constructions operate to help in the formation of human ways of living in response to a reality which, though unperceived, makes itself felt in creative and successful development and in harsh resistance and limitation. Within cultural evolution, the relationship between religion and other social and cultural expressions must always be one of identity and difference, identity in that religion shares with the rest of culture the quality of being response, response not simply to the environment narrowly conceived but to that reality to which the natural environment also responds, and difference in that religion concerns itself with the totality of our lives, with the essence of our being, and has its experience of resonanceand its experiences of resistance at the very limits of human life and consciousness.[15]

It is a pleasure and a privilege to offer this as a small token of esteem and gratitude to Professor J. Weingreen on the occasion of his eighieth birthday.

Notes

1. G.A. Herion, "The Impact of Modern and Social Scientific Assumptions on the Reconstruction of

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Israelite History", JSOT 34, 1986, 3-33.

2. R.R. Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, Fortress Press, 1980

3. N.K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh: a sociology of the religion of liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E. SCM Press 1980.

4. Herion, op.cit., 11

5. J. Rogerson, "The Use of Sociology in Old Testament Studies", VTS 36, 1985, 245-256

6. Cf. J.M. Sassoon, "On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History", JSOT 21, 1981, 3-24, who has shown how American and European historians of ancient Israel have been influenced by their own contexts.

7. Runciman's adherence to the British School of analytic philosophy is noted by Rogerson, op.cit.256

8. A. Giddens. Social Theory and Modern Sociology, Polity Press 1987, 52ff

9. ibid,, 6ff

10. K. Whitelam, "Recreating the History of Israel", JSOT 35, 1986, 45-70. See also F.S. Frick, The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel: a survey of models and theories, Sheffield 1985

11. Cf R. Bocock,Freud and Modern Society", Nelson 1976, 8: "a sociology of the unconscious would.....point out the unintended consequences of social action... (and) the part unconscious emotional processes play in both the creation and maintenance of existing societies, and their role in creating change".

12. R.P. Carroll, When Prophecy Failed: reactions and responses to failure in the Old Testament prophetic traditions, SCM Press 1979, 124

13. P. Berger, A Rumour of Angels, Penguin 1970

14. G. Theissen, Biblical Faith, SCM Press 1984

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15. It is then clear that no sharp distinction is possible between ideology and theology. Religion or faith will necessarily have characteristics of both. See the discussion in P.D. Miller,"Faith and Ideology in the Old Testament",Magnalia Dei. The Mighty Acts of God (Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright) ed. F.M. Cross, W.E. Lemke, P.D. Miller, Doubleday 1976, 464-479

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