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Kenneth Berding

The Hermeneutical Framework of Social-Scientific Criticism: How much can Evangelicals get involved?

Some Christians may well be suspicious of critical methods of biblical study which treat the Bible 'like any other book'. Dr Berding, who teaches at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, here submits social-scientific criticism to careful scrutiny.

Introduction

Why did early-Christian itinerant preachers expect hospitality? What would a Palestinian or an Ephesian think of when they noticed someone fasting? How did a father view his role in the family; how did a mother view her role in the family? Why did Paul argue so vehemently when he asserted his apostleship in 2 Corinthians? How did he feel about the challenge to his apostleship? How did a first century employee view his responsibilities to an employer? Did it matter who the employer was? How did a villager look upon a stranger in his/her village? Did it matter who the visitor was? Did it matter if a visitor dropped in unannounced? What are the answers to these and similar questions? Wouldn't knowing the answers to such questions aid in NT interpretation?[1]

The practitioners of social-scientific criticism assert that they have the answers. They may not have an answer to every biblical question, but they believe they have a framework within which they can posit plausible answers. The suggestion that there are more definitive answers to many of these elusive biblical and Bible-related issues than has traditionally been thought is one of the most attractive features of this rapidly expanding area of biblical interpretation.[2] This article

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1 The present discussion is just as relevant for OT interpretation as for NT. However, the practitioners being evaluated in this paper have thus far concentrated their work on the NT.

2 Stephen Barton, 'Anthropology and the NT', *ET* 94 (1983), 345.

will seek to expose the hermeneutical assumptions and methodology of one specific group of social-scientific critics who have collaborated on a number of projects, John H. Elliott, Bruce J. Malina, Jerome H. Neyrey, John J. Pilch and Richard Rohrbaugh. This paper will at times lean more heavily upon Malina since he has written more than the others and is often explicit about his methods.[3] It should be stated at the outset that the author of this critique is at the same time a conservative evangelical and yet is sympathetic to the goals and potentialities of social-scientific criticism, notwithstanding some reservations. This sympathy will not prevent a vigorous critique of the method as employed by these scholars.[4] But it is hoped that this article will produce in the evangelical reader greater confidence and know-how when drawing from the writings of these scholars who are filling our theological libraries with their articles and books.

Inasmuch as one goal of this article is to encourage evangelicals to judiciously employ insights gleaned from cultural anthropology into their study of biblical texts, a recent book by David A. deSilva will be highlighted at the end of this article as an example of how evangelicals can fruitfully proceed.

Orientation to Social-Scientific Criticism

Social-scientific criticism could appropriately be considered a new sub-category under the old historical criticism, though the practitioners often emphasize its newness.[5] The method, '. . .seriously considers texts as socially and culturally conditioned documents'.[6] Though the particular term 'social-scientific criticism' did not take on the narrow meaning it presently has until 1986,[7] the trend toward

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3 Nolland comments in his review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 'The influence of Malina on the group is evidently strong, and in the judgment of this reviewer the quality of the essays is at its best where this influence is most evident.' John Nolland, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, in *EvQ* 66 (1994), 82.

4 The role of my own presuppositions is recognized and understood to play an important part in the critique which is to follow. The framework for these presuppositions will be expanded in the last section of this paper, 'Evangelicals Scholars and Social-Scientific Criticism'.

5 John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 1. See also comments in Joel B. Green, Review of *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*, by Bruce J. Malina, *EvQ* 59 (1987), 269.

6 David M. May, *Social Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: A Bibliography*, NABPR Bibliographical Series, 4 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 1.

7 J. H. Elliott, 'Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: More on Methods and Models', *Semeia* 35 (1986), 1-33.

an extensive use of this method can be traced to the early 1970s.[8] The social-scientific criticism which concerns us in this paper should be contrasted with the sociology which came out of the European humanities (as in 'the sociology of knowledge' or 'the sociology of science').[9] Sociological interpretations of Scripture, when defined broadly, can include the methods of 'the social sciences (such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and economics), as well as those typical of the humanities (history, comparative religions, literary criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, redaction criticism, tradition history, etc.)'.[10] Our concern in this analysis is on the more narrow area dubbed 'social-scientific criticism' by its practitioners, and, in particular, that sub-section of the discipline which is informed by cultural anthropology. The concern of scholars engaged in social-scientific criticism is more with determining the way people of Bible times interacted with one another and the impact of these relational structures to the interpretation of texts and less with the material culture (such as, food, commerce, work, institutions) or political or geographical backgrounds.[11]

The matrices of such sociologists and anthropologists as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Louis Kriesberg, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have provided a framework from which those applying sociological theory to the NT have drawn.[12]

The major groupings of scholars who focus upon social-scientific criticism are the SBL group called *Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation,*[13] *Social Sciences and New Testament Exegesis* at the Catholic Biblical Association, and the *Social Facets Seminar* of the Westar Insti-

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8 May, *Social Scientific Criticism,* 3. Gerd Theissen, *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), was an important early work, foreshadowing in some respects what was about to become a wave of related studies.

9 Bruce J. Malina, 'Interpretation: Reading, Abduction, Metaphor', in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday,* ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 355, n. 1.

10 Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism,* 2d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 179.

11 For an excellent overview of the relation of the Bible to the social sciences, see Carolyn Osiek, 'The New Handmaid: The Bible and Social Sciences', *TS* 50 (1989) 260-278.

12 Barton, 'Historical Criticism', and Social-Scientific Perspectives in New Testament Study', in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation,* ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) and M. Robert Mulholland, 'Sociological Criticism', in *New Testament Criticism & Interpretation,* ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 301.

13 Since 1983.

tute,[14] as well as the more recently formed *The Context Group: Project on the Bible in its Cultural Environment.*[15] The five scholars being evaluated in this paper are perhaps the five most prolific members of *The Context Group.* Many of the members of these groups are members of more than one group.[16] An important organ for the dissemination of their ideas is *Biblical Theology Bulletin.*

Hermeneutical Frameworks

In this section, the aim is to draw out the working presuppositions of these scholars, their understanding of meaning, and their methodology.[17] Most of what is illustrated here would also be affirmed by other members of the Context Group.

Presuppositions

Scholars working from a social-scientific framework would be pleased to have their presuppositions critiqued since they attempt to be self-conscious about their own presuppositions.[18] They often complain that Western interpreters lack awareness of their own presuppositions.[19] Biblical interpreters are called to fully face their presuppositions, intuitive methods of interpretation, and implicit operating principles.[20] Historical-critical scholars are criticized for describing the culture of the biblical documents in such a way that they look suspiciously similar to modern Western culture.[21] 'Fundamentalists' are criticized for reading their own meanings into texts without real-

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14 Osiek, 'The New Handmaid', 268-269.

15 The 'Context Group' had their first meeting in Portland, OR on March 22-24, 1990. Malina, 'Interpretation', 355, n. 1. Some of their key players banded together to write Jerome H. Neyrey, ed. *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peobody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991). Another joint project is Richard Rohrbaugh, ed., *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

16 See Barton, 'Historical Criticism', 86-89 for a good summary of key social-scientific exegetes.

17 The extensive use of anthropological jargon can be daunting to the uninitiated. See Malina's defense of the such jargon in Bruce J. Malina, 'The Received View and What it Cannot do: III John and Hospitality', *Semeia* 35 (1986), 172. This entire issue of *Semeia* was dedicated to social-scientific criticism.

18   Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless,* 12.

19 Bruce J. Malina, 'The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation', *Int* 36 (1982), 239.

20 Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 166-184.

21 Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences,* 10; Malina, 'The Received View', 175.

izing it.[22]

The working assumption is that the NT texts have lying behind them an unspoken context which, if it can be filled in, will help in understanding the passages themselves.[23] Neyrey says that the goal of these scholars is to find a historical-critical methodology that tries to avoid anachronism and ethnocentrism.[24] Context Group members contend that in this regard social science models provide the best lenses for approaching the text.[25]

The most fundamental presupposition is that 'Reality is socially interpreted.'[26] There is no other lens through which one can interpret reality. Belief in supernatural causes is theoretically allowable, but since such supernatural causes are not verifiable, such divine intervention is not brought into the discussion.[27] Sin, for instance, is to be understood socially: 'Just as dirt is matter out of place, so the deviant, the sinner, is one who disturbs the social order by being out of place or by putting someone or something out of place.'[28] And again, 'Instead of moral guidelines and theological propositions, we would discover social persons and the underpinnings of their interpersonal relationships.'[29]

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22 Malina clearly has little patience with 'fundamentalists'. He defines them as people who view the Bible as unique, to the point that they only try to get meanings out of the text that they put into it, disregarding the intentions and statements of the original authors. He says concerning them, '. . .although they say they believe in an inerrant and inspired Bible text, they mean an inerrant and inspired reader, that is, they themselves, each with a dispensation from God from the normal ignorance and stupidity characteristic of pretentious human beings the world over.' Malina, 'Interpretation' 355, n. 2. Since many who would call themselves fundamentalists and, more broadly, many of those who affirm inerrancy of the Bible (whether they think of themselves as fundamentalists or not) would be sympathetic to the basic notion of trying to understand the biblical writer in his historical, cultural, social, and linguistic context, it appears that Malina has rather unfairly caricatured inerrantists. Of course, those 'fundamentalists' who do in fact ignore the contextual backdrops of the NT in favor of their own intuitive readings, do so at their own peril.

23 David E. Garland, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, *RevExp* 90 (1993) 428.

24 Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, xi.

25 Malina's only stated reason that the social-scientific approach is the best approach is that (he claims) only it is open to validation. Other models are intuitively based. Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 239.

26 Bruce J. Malina, 'The Bible, Witness or Warrant: Reflections on Daniel Patte's *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*', *BTB* 26 (1996) 86.

27 Malina wants us to abandon the term 'theology' except in specific discussions relating to a concept of God. In its place he would prefer the term 'ideology'. Malina, 'The Received View', 174.

28 Malina, *Christian Origins*, 26.

29 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 242.

Rohrbaugh, it is true, points out difficulties in specifying particular social groupings in light of overlapping boundaries of various social groups and gives suggestions on how to draw the lines carefully. But, in spite of the risks, he and the others still consider the attempt productive.[30]

Malina equivocates on the issue of whether universal interpretative principles exist. He says he is unwilling to give ontological status to the models he employs. They are merely 'more or less adequate' ways to approach the world of the NT.[31] But elsewhere, in an article in which he attacks Romanticism and the concept of multiple-meaninged texts which yield individualized interpretations, he asserts that 'each person must comply with objective moral standards' when coming to a text/work of art.[32]

Reason is assumed by these scholars as ultimate in the task of biblical interpretation. 'Biblical interpretation consists in an interpreter's diligent application of those mental functions that serve to select, shape, and adapt some set of real-world environments that might match the scenarios depicted in the texts.'[33]

These scholars are not unaware of circularity in their approach. But they would contend that such circularity is inevitable since humans are unable to think and reason in any other way.[34] At the same time, they would deny that it is a vicious circle because the point of return or conclusion is always slightly different than the original postulation as a result of interaction with the text (thus, we might say, it is more like a spiral).[35]

A very large gulf between our present cultural situation and the life-setting of a person in the first century Mediterranean world is often assumed: 'Culture described in the document has little or nothing in common with that of the interpreter.'[36] Meanings generated by the application of sociological models are deemed to be 'irrelevant'

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30 Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Social Location of Thought' as a Heuristic Construct in New Testament Study', *JSNT* 30 (1987): 103-119.

31 Malina, 'Interpretation', 266.

32 Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 86. It is not a small issue to accuse someone of inconsistency, especially in an area of crucial concern to that author. But I cannot find a way to resolve this seeming contradiction.

33 Malina, 'Interpretation', 253-254.

34 Ibid. 257-258.

35 Ibid. 258. Concerning 'eisegesis', in line with Malina, May comments, 'The scholar carefully and thoughtfully reads into the text the cultural values and social locations of the original readers and hearers.' Thus, these practitioners are not trying to distance themselves from such criticisms. May, *Social-Scientific Criticism*, 3.

36 Malina, 'The Received View', 175.

to us in our society.[37] Naturally, they may be at least somewhat under-standable to us, but only as a description of what was happening in the first century.[38] Malina declares that the Bible is only a 'witness' to the way the biblical authors and characters found God in their own context, 'even as we must find God in our own contemporary experience.'[39] The Bible is in no way a 'warrant' for our actions, only a 'witness' to how the biblical personages understood life in relation to God.[40] Rohrbaugh says, 'Using the text as warrant for one's personal or religious agenda was among those things the modern sense of history deflates', and agrees that such deflation was necessary.[41]

An implicit determinism is recognized in this approach. But practitioners are quick to point out that it is only a determinism limited to the application of the model in use at a particular time. In theory, data that might be adduced from other models (even those not of the social-scientific type) are not precluded.[42]

Understanding of 'Meaning'

These scholars emphasize that more important than the nature of language as an entity itself are the situations in which language is used. Elliott says, 'Texts are units of meaningful social discourse. . .'[43] Malina comments,

> Meanings, past and present, that are realized in language, are in fact ultimately rooted in a social system.[44]

and,

> Again, where do the meanings come from? The answer is the social system.[45]

It is assumed that a human being who intends to communicate something can be understood by others, but only within that person's cultural context.[46] Malina says, 'People within the same system do not need interpretation; they can usually understand quite directly, if not

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37 John J. Pilch, Review of *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity*, by Stevan L. Davies, in TS 57 (1996), 182.
38 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 241.
39 Malina, 'Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke-Acts', in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 23.
40 Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 82-87.
41 Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 'A Social Scientific Response', Semeia 72 (1995), 247-258.
42 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 238.
43 John H. Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 49.
44 Malina, 'The Received View', 172.
45 Malina, *Christian Origins*, 1, following Mary Douglas.
46 Malina, 'Interpretation', 254.

intuitively.'[47] But outside of that context, there is no meaning. Malina questions the relevance of a translation because a translation is cut off from its social context. Language, then, is entirely a social product.[48] Michael A. K. Halliday's theories are often cited as a theoretical model of language.[49]

The propositional model of language which deals with texts at the word and sentence level is rejected. The propositional model says that when a text is read, it brings up a mental image in the reader consisting of a chain of propositions which follow the pattern of a sentence. Malina claims that the propositional model is at the foundation of most structural exegesis. He, instead, opts for a 'scenario model', in which the text evokes an image which is already present in the thinking of the reader. The reader then alters that image appropriately as the text demands.[50]

Interpreters, it is emphasized, should only work with whole documents, since individual phrases have no meaning apart from the conception of the whole.[51] Every document reflects the perspectives, values, and ideologies of the writer of the document.[52]

Unlike many modern readings of the Bible, the original context is important for these scholars, including author, text and original receptor.[53] 'Ordinary readings produced with no thought to being considerate of what the authors of the documents said and meant in their original time, place and culture are, as a rule, unethical readings.'[54] This quote illustrates how the intention of the author is considered important. Meaning is also related to the receptor, for the goal is to ascertain, '. . .the meaning it yielded its original receiver(s).'[55] These scholars, then, are against reader-response scenarios, particularly when the readers are twentieth century North Americans or Europeans.[56]

Whatever meaning is to be found is to be found in the text at hand, as located in its original social context. Other texts (even within the

47 Ibid. 356, n. 7.
48 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 229.
49 Michael A. K. Halliday. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978).
50 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 230-231. See also 'Reading Theory Perspective', 13-17.
51 Malina, 'The Received View', 176.
52 Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* 51-52.
53 Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 8-9.
54 Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 84. Note also John J. Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (New York/Mahweh: Paulist Press, 1991), 7.
55 Malina, 'The Received View', 176.
56 Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 84-86

Bible itself) do not inform us of the meaning of the text at hand. Thus, Malina considers the analogy of faith as only a way 'to explain away the results of biblical interpretation'.[57]

Method

A model is postulated for interpreting a text, usually based upon the observation of real situations (such as are found in modern Mediterranean cultures). The text is then interpreted within this framework.[58] Understanding models is crucial for understanding the work of these scholars. Rohrbaugh comments that models are '. . .something every essay in this volume proposes' (in reference to a collection of essays from Context Group members).[59] A model is an abstraction by which one makes sense of the particulars with which one is faced.[60] Human beings cannot interpret apart from models, so it is better to make one's model explicit, rather than be using one without knowing it, these scholars emphasize. The non-technical explanation is that 'human beings chunk in order to understand'.[61]

In his introductory textbook, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Malina draws upon five 'models' which he considers key to understanding the first-century Mediterranean world. These are: 1. honor and shame, 2. group-orientation, 3. the perception of limited good and goods, 4. kinship and marriage, 5. cleanliness and uncleanliness.[62] Neyrey works with these and other 'grids' such as patron/client relationships and understanding of the physical body throughout his Anchor Bible commentary on 2 Peter and Jude.[63] These models are not mutually exclusive and are sometimes used simultaneously in interpreting a given passage.

Each of these are names for complex grids which describe the way cultural interactions take place based upon a study of some part of the modern Mediterranean world. Anthropological generalizations are posited to make sense of the observable data which is coming out of these cultures. These generalizations then form the grid which is used to understand the meaning of biblical texts, supplanting the implicit grid which an interpreter is usually unaware even exists. The

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57 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 237.
58 Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences*, 8-10. Malina, 'Interpretation', 256.
59 Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences*, 8.
60 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 232.
61 Ibid. 232.
62 Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 25-152.
63 Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 37C, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

goal is to make the grid broad enough so as to cover the greatest number of specific cases.[64] Malina variously uses three primary contemporary sociological matrices available when he analyses the biblical text: structural functionalist, conflict and symbolic.[65] He says, 'There is no model to help understand all models.'[66] He regularly draws upon the works of the anthropologist Mary Douglas who has developed a group/grid matrix for heightening awareness of sociological interactions.[67]

An Appraisal

In this section, the assumptions and practice of the method as employed by this group of scholars will be critiqued, with a view to aiding the evangelical interpreter in knowing how to read and use the work of social-scientific exegetes without getting caught unaware of assumptions and overstatements. As with all critiques, this will focus primarily on areas of disagreement.

Fundamental Disagreements

It is at the level of presuppositions that evangelical interpreters will have the most difficulty.[68] The primary differences are as follows:

1. Universal interpretive principles
How do these scholars know their method is correct? As has been discussed above, Malina is not clear about whether there are objective

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64 Pilch and Malina, *Biblical Social Values*, xxxviii-xxxix.
65 The three primary sociological models as described in Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, rev. ed., (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1978) and described by Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 239-237 are:
  1   Structural functionalist models: Social interactions are shared patterns of understandings of what behavior should be. Based on consensus.
  2   Conflict models: The norm of society is constant change because different groups have different goals which cause them to be in conflict.Change only can be inhibited if groups agree to constrain it for some reason.
  3   Symbolic models: People react to another person, thing, or event based upon their perception of the value of that entity. These values are the framework within which they determine what is meaningful. These values are societally determined.
66 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 237.
67 See list of Douglas's works from which Malina draws in Malina, *Christian Origins*, 210-211. 'Group' in Douglas's scheme, has to do with an individual's commitment to the group, 'grid' has to do with the amount of control the group exercises on the individual.
68 See Osiek, 'The New Handmaid', 275-277 for a good summary of typical (not necessarily evangelical) criticisms of these methods.

interpretive principles, sometimes seeming to affirm that such objective principles exist (against reader-response methodology) and sometimes saying that these are merely working models. How does he know his models are adequate? And if adequate, we must ask, by which standard?

His only stated reason for preferring the social-scientific method is that it is open to validation.[69] But its validation is itself based upon sociological models, which then creates a potentially vicious circle.[70] In fact, there is no ultimate reference point, except human reason.[71]

The perceptive reader will notice that in practice, 'models' often become so ossified that they themselves begin to function as standards. This could eventually result, as Osiek insightfully observes, in social-scientific criticism beginning to perceive itself as the new ''objective', foolproof method', similar to the way historical criticism has often viewed itself.[72]

The evangelical affirms the necessity of an absolute standard by which we judge all interpretations. That standard is God's communication, the Bible, against which all models should be judged.

2. Supernatural intervention and transcendent values

The most common application of social-scientific models to the Bible assumes that there is no divine intervention in the biblical world; the descriptions generated by the models are limited to social interactions and perceptions. Sociological approaches tend to horizontalize everything which is interpreted. A corollary of this is that we are left with no transcendent messages in the Bible, only socially determined outcomes.[73]

Evangelicals, on the other hand, believe that the Bible, though set in a cultural context, contains many trans-cultural truths, which were given to correct us and train us in what is right (2 Tim. 3:16).[74] This is further confirmed by Jesus' confidence that the gospel was able to penetrate even to 'the remotest part of the earth' (Acts 1:8), that is,

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69 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 239.

70 Note discussion of circularity below.

71 Malina, 'Interpretation', 253-254. Malina, though much more aware of his presuppositions than most other scholars, still sometimes forgets that he is affected by them, as in this statement, 'Unlike modern literary criticism, social-scientific criticism leaves little room for anachronistic and ethnocentric warrants.' Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 86.

72 Osiek, 'The New Handmaid', 276-277.

73 Malina, 'Reading Theory Perspective', 23. Note Joel Green's comments in his Review of *Christian Origins*, 269.

74 The 'Scriptures' listed here were the OT scriptures, written in a different time and cultural setting.

into different cultural contexts.

I. Howard Marshall, by way of positive example, refers to the instance of development in understanding of the term 'Messiah' and says, 'the original biblical revelation seems to have been capable of transcending the cultural categories available for its expression.'[75]

Even more important is God's revelation of himself. Is Christology, for example, best understood from a social-scientific perspective?[76] There is no question that we need to understand what individual statements meant in their cultural contexts.[77] But even if we observe how others perceived Jesus, we do not learn what is essential to his character without his self-revelation (Jn. 1:14). The disciples themselves (and certainly the crowd) did not understand until later the truths which they considered to be most essential about Jesus the Messiah.

Is a sociological/psychological model adequate to describe Jesus' interactions with demons? Pilch assumes as much: 'Jesus the spirit-filled healer and exorcist had the common human genetic ability to experience and induce in others altered states of consciousness which his culture identified as possession or trance states.'[78] For the evangelical, demon-possession cannot be flattened onto a sociological plane.

The NT writers believed that God had supernaturally changed their lives. A naturalistic approach is not adequate for describing what they assert occurred so as to change their lives. One of the main reasons that Christians were persecuted is that their life-styles which were changed by the gospel challenged both Jewish and Gentile cultures.[79] Any model which eliminates the supernatural working of God and the idea of transcendent values will find itself being imposed upon a text rather than functioning as a complementary backdrop which gives context to the text.

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75 Marshall, 'Culture and the New Testament', 24.
76 Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988). Also, Jerome H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).
77 Evangelicals are interested in such issues as whether the accusation that Jesus was demon-possessed was really equivalent to calling him a witch. Malina and Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names*, 3-23. Malina and Neyrey may or may not be correct, but they have asked a question an evangelical could have asked.
78 Pilch, Review of *Jesus the Healer*, 182.
79 I. Howard Marshall, 'Culture and the New Testament', in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. Robert T. Coote and John Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 29.

Differences of Degree (Non-fundamental Differences)

1. Newness of the method

Often there is a simplistic division made by practitioners of this method between social-scientific criticism (which is 'new') and historical criticism. But though some of the models are new, biblical historians have always been concerned to uncover the same issues which concern the social-scientific interpreters.[80] In evangelical circles, even many very conservative scholars recognize the need to be sensitive to social/cultural backgrounds.[81] We may say that the very concept of the method as a distinct method appears to be overdone.

2. Overstatement in cultural comparisons

The problem addressed here shows itself in three areas. In the first two areas, social-scientific exegetes are too optimistic and in the third they are too pessimistic.

First, these scholars are often too optimistic about uniformity in the first century Mediterranean world. Observations in books such as Malina's *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* are provocative but one is left wondering how uniform the Mediterranean world really was.[82] Are the values of village life and city life in the first century Mediterranean world all the same, as seems to be implied by Malina?[83] The reader senses a need for practitioners to draw more from epigraphic evidence which illustrates life in the cities of the first century Aegean and Mediterranean regions to confirm the models which they propose.[84] These would likely yield many similarities between cultures but would also potentially yield some cultural differences.

Second, these practitioners are too optimistic about the similarities between modern Mediterranean cultures and their corresponding first century counterparts. In the attempt to use modern Mediterranean cultures as the starting point for comparison with first century cultures, the present writer is sympathetic. That the cultural setting of a modern Syrian village is much closer to the cultural context of a first century Palestinian village than it is to a city in, say, North America is admitted by cultural anthropologists unanimously. The

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80 David Peterson, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, in *Reformed Theological Review* 52 (1993) 38.

81 Noted by Mulholland, 'Sociological Criticism', 299.

82 Ibid. 301.

83 F. F. Bruce, Review of *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, by Bruce Malina, in *JSNT* 21 (1984) 112.

84 Ibid. 112.

alternative to starting from such a framework is to start with our unstated North American cultural framework which is guaranteed to skew somewhat the interpretive results. Nevertheless, it is invalid methodologically to draw from modern anthropological norms and assume that there is constancy between the present and the past without producing evidence from the first century that it is so.[85]

Third, these scholars are too pessimistic about the differences between modern North American culture and the cultures of the first century Mediterranean world.[86] Some pessimism is certainly in order, since there are many cultural norms of the modern day Middle East which are barely intelligible to modern Westerners. But, as Nolland points out, modern Westerners are more 'dyadic' than scholars such as Malina and Neyrey suggest and there was more individualism in the first century than they probably would be willing to allow.[87] It is oversimplification to say that twentieth century North America is individualistic and first century Palestine was group oriented. It would, however, not be fallacious to say that North Americans are much *more* individualistic than were first century Jews, since Jews living in Palestine viewed themselves much more in relation to their social groupings than in relation to individualistic goals. Does a person who lives in a largely group-oriented culture really have no self-identity?[88] Such issues need to be nuanced with greater care.

3. A need for more awareness of emic and etic distinctions

Kenneth Pike's distinction between the emic perspective (the sociological event or linguistic entity as perceived by the insider) and the etic perspective (the same phenomenon as interpreted via outside models) is relevant here.[89] Are the social and cultural situations which lay behind the NT texts really interpreted through the lenses of the insiders themselves (as is sometimes claimed) or is the driving force the outside sociological models employed?[90] It is clear that

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85 Peterson, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 38.
86 Rohrbaugh, *The Social Sciences*, 3-6; Malina, 'The Received View', 175; Malina, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 82; Pilch, Review of *Jesus the Healer*, 182.
87 John Nolland, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 83.
88 David E. Holwerda, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), 255-256.
89 See Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris, eds., *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, Frontiers of Anthropology, vol. 7 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).
90 An emic description is not simply gained if 'we asked the natives to describe what is going on', as Neyrey suggests. Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990): 13; also Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?* 39. Once a native begins to reflect on his/her culture, the reflection moves outside the emic into the etic.

Malina and Neyrey are consciously trying to approximate an insider's perspective on character assessment in *Portraits of Paul*.[91] But how does this work together with the etic assessments found throughout their other work and represented by the application of modern interpretive frameworks to ancient texts? A more self-conscious understanding of these distinctions and their relationship to the interpretation of texts appears necessary.

4. Circularity

Many evangelicals will have more than a little trouble with the open admission of circularity in this method.[92] Yet an evangelical also is unable to break out of a certain broad circular reasoning.[93] However, even when one large logical circle is assumed (i.e. the triune God of the Bible always as starting point), smaller logical circles are not acceptable, otherwise all communication will eventually reduce to gibberish.

5. Reductionism and the problem of particulars

Almost every critique of this methodology includes a complaint of reductionism and the failure to let the models be corrected by the text itself.[94] The grand-unifying scheme approach is one of the attractive aspects of a social-scientific approach.[95] But there is considerable danger of oversimplification. Just as it is possible to overextend our models when we attempt to contextualize in communication with other cultures,[96] it is possible to overextend when we apply models from the outside to the biblical corpus. And though these analyses can help us see general patterns in a culture, it must be remembered that there are many individual cases which do not follow a given pattern.[97] We need to attempt to look at a given passage in light of multiple models simultaneously, no matter how difficult this is to carry out in practice. 'Subuniverses of meaning' (to use Berger and Luck-

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91 Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*.

92 See Malina, 'Interpretation', 257-258. Peterson complains, 'The New Testament is used to validate their conclusions about the culture and their conclusions are used to interpret the New Testament.' Peterson, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 38.

93 Vern S. Poythress, 'Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An application of Van Til's idea of Analogy', *WTJ* 57 (1995), 212.

94 Mulholland, 'Sociological Criticism', 305; Green, Review of *Christian Origins*, 269; Osiek, 'The New Handmaid', 277.

95 Paul G. Hiebert, Review of *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*, by B. J. Malina, in *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 15 (1987), 91.

96 Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 164-176.

97 Nolland, Review of *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 83.

mann's phrase) are realities in every text.[98] Unless acknowledged, meanings which do in fact exist can be corrupted. True, a Galilean peasant cared what the significant-others in his life thought. But he also cared about the zealot band who had threatened to burn his field if he didn't donate money to their cause. Interpreting on the basis of the first without acknowledging the second is reductionistic.

One illustration of reductionism is the following description of compassion. 'In the Mediterranean world, compassion. . .is expected only in situations guided and governed by kinship considerations.'[99] Though this particular assertion may be an accurate description of many modern Mediterranean cultures (the present author agrees) and though it may be a correct generalization of how compassion operated in most of the first century Mediterranean world (probably agrees), the NT Christian value was compassion toward all, not just in a circle limited to family and friends, being modeled after the one who had compassion on the multitude (Mk. 8:2; Gal. 6:10). Thus, a first-century Christian whose world-view was in the process of being altered toward the new perspective might truly and sincerely view compassion toward all as a necessity. It then becomes a fallacy to assert that he or she will only tend to show compassion toward his or her kinship group.

6. Determinism

Malina affirms a type of social determinism, as mentioned above, but only within his models.[100] At the same time, it should be remembered that Malina and the others in practice only work within their models. Was Paul 'utterly dependent on group expectations'?[101] Does he not sometimes act in a way that simply cannot be accounted for by any social model? Malina would say we have to find some model for his action. But isn't there a limit to what any sociological model can explain (such as when faced with a miracle)?

Evangelicals can and do accept a sovereign God working in the world, but not a determinism dictated by a model that is too limited to account for all the data.

7. Insufficient attention to the text itself

Models are often 'applied to first-century texts that are given insuffi-

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98 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 85-86.

99 Pilch and Malina, *Biblical Social Values*, xvii.

100 Malina, 'The Social Sciences', 238.

101 Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 217.

cient historical and literary, still less theological analysis.'[102] It is admitted that every scholar cannot be an expert on every area. But to ignore or lightly treat relevant epigraphic, historical or theological studies only keeps the interpreter from moving forward in his/her task of understanding the passage.

Suggestions for Reading These Books

In light of these various criticisms, how can an evangelical benefit from and draw upon observations made by scholars employing social-critical methods? Three suggestions are in order:

1. Be aware of their presuppositions as described in this paper. Become more aware of your own presuppositions.
2. Always compare their models with the particulars in the text. Make the model subservient to the text rather than vice versa.
3. Always ask whether there might be a better interpretive framework than the one being employed (whether social-scientific or not).

Evangelical Scholars and Social-Scientific Criticism

Not only can evangelicals read and benefit (carefully) from the works of these scholars; there is no reason why evangelicals should not become more active in trying to employ the cultural frameworks of the Bible into their interpretation of specific passages. Of course, the methodology will be more cautious and the conclusions may be less dramatic than those drawn by Context Group members. Perhaps those in the Context Group would not even recognize such activity as social-scientific criticism. Regardless of the nomenclature, it is time that evangelicals became more aware of their existing presuppositions and attempted to enter more deeply into the cultural world of the New Testament authors.

Principles for Evangelicals Who Want to Use Cultural Backgrounds in Interpretation

1. Be aware that everyone comes to the text with presuppositions.
2. Allow your presuppositions to be altered by interaction with the biblical (and other first century) material which touches upon cultural backgrounds.

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102 E. Earle Ellis, Review of *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context,* ed. Philip F. Ester, in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 39 (1996), 64.

3. Become more aware of the cultural anthropological frame-
works of the modern Mediterranean World (especially in the
Middle East).

4. Carefully compare these general anthropological features to
descriptions found in the NT and other first century litera-
ture.[103]

5. Look for differences and similarities among various first cen-
tury cultures. Both 4. and 5. will require greater digging into
the literature of the first century world.

6. Give preference to broader frameworks (like honor/shame
and group orientation) and less to narrower models. Use
these only as backdrops for understanding the social contexts
of various passages.

7. Make sure that any anthropological model is subservient to
the Scripture, rather than vice versa.[104] If the passage in ques-
tion seems to contradict the model, abandon or alter the
model instead of altering the text.

8. Compare and contrast the NT literature with what seems to
be general in the surrounding culture.[105] Ask whether the NT
characters are functioning in agreement with the cultural
norms or whether they are challenging the norms (not
assuming either is always true).

A Positive Example: David A. deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship &
Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture
(Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000)

There are comparatively few evangelicals who have done scholarly
work in cultural backgrounds. David deSilva is a notable exception.[106]
DeSilva's recent book, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* is a primer
on four central cultural features of the first century. Readers will rec-
ognize the similarity in content between this book and Malina's book,

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103 See C. Rene Padilla, 'Hermeneutics and Culture: A Theological Perspective', in
Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture, ed. Robert T. Coote and John Stott
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

104 J. Robertson McQuilkin, 'The Behavioral Sciences under the authority of Scrip-
ture', *JETS* 20 (1977), 42.

105 Mulholland, 'Sociological Criticism', 307.

106 DeSilva has qualified himself to write such an introductory primer through many
excellent related studies that have come before. See especially *Despising Shame:*
Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews, SBLDS 152
(Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) and *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Tes-*
tament Interpretation (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999). Also, among his
many excellent articles see 'Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and
Patron-Client Relations'. *JBL* 115 (1996): 91-116.

The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). Three of four models employed by deSilva are comparable to three of five models employed by Malina in his book. DeSilva is apparently indebted to the work of Malina and the other scholars evaluated in this article, as evidenced by his frequent references to their works. But deSilva's book has a markedly different tone and his method diverges at a number of significant points. Only a few will be mentioned here.

In contrast to Malina, deSilva apparently thinks that biblical passages can be normative for Christian living. If we were to employ the language of Malina, deSilva might consider these passages to be a 'warrant' for a particular action, not merely a 'witness' of how people used to live.[107] Thus, for deSilva, the NT can be described as 'guidance' (87), as an 'outline [of] what a just and suitable response would entail', (155) or as what the Bible 'calls' us to do (301).

DeSilva, refreshingly, makes primary source materials (both biblical and extra-biblical) from the first century (or shortly before or after) – rather than studies on the modern Mediterranean or Middle Eastern cultures – the foundation for his cultural descriptions. The primary sources from which he draws in many cases show that the cultural traits described in modern anthropological studies parallel very closely the values of the first century world, at least as they relate to those descriptions which are adequately broad (like honor and shame). DeSilva is strong (perhaps strongest) in his interaction with these primary sources.

While allowing for diversity in emphasis and presentation, deSilva does not pit texts against one another. Moreover, he is willing for a text under discussion to correct a model (though he rarely uses the term 'model') and painstakingly tries to subsume the model under the text, rather than forcing the text into the model. God's grace 'goes far beyond' Seneca's notions of generosity (129), 'Jesus is notably more austere on this point [divorce] than his contemporaries' (178); and 'the Christian culture drew an impassible line' in limiting sexual relations to the marriage bed (229).[108]

Though there is no discussion of presuppositions or method in deSilva's book, the evangelical interpreter will resonate with much of what he is trying to do. This book will serve well as an example of how evangelicals can engage in the area most often called social-scientific criticism.

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107 Cf. Malina's comments in, 'The Bible: Witness or Warrant', 82-87.
108 DeSilva (135, n. 32) in one instance specifically takes one of Malina's models to task with the comment, 'Such a reading, however novel, cannot be supported from the text', and then argues against Malina's imposition of a model on the text in question.

Conclusion

Social-scientific criticism, at least if done carefully along the lines suggested above, holds promise for the evangelical biblical scholar. In all likelihood, such evangelical analysis will not radically alter the meanings arrived at through grammatical-historical studies, but it most certainly will enrich the passages, putting living flesh upon the sometimes dry bones of textual analysis, adding color and perspective and allowing us to see the world, characters and message of the NT with greater vigor.

Abstract

How can an evangelical read and benefit from the writings of the so-called social-scientific critic? To what extent can an evangelical participate in this approach to interpreting the Bible? This article seeks answers to these questions. It lays out and evaluates the hermeneutical assumptions and methodology of some of the most prolific writers among those practicing social-scientific criticism. The conclusion is that there are a couple fundamental issues at stake, a few non-fundamental differences of degree, but many potential areas of benefit for the evangelical interpreter who wants to draw upon cultural-anthropological and social-scientific models in interpreting the Bible.