RBL 6/2013

Olyan, Saul M., ed.

Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospects

Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study 71


Bob Becking
Utrecht University
Utrecht, The Netherlands

In the last fifty years or so, social theory has gained ground in biblical studies. The use of theories, hypotheses, and methods from the social sciences—mainly from sociology, anthropology, and ethnography—is, however, very haphazard and sometimes arbitrary. In reading publications from the crossroad of the two disciplines, one often has the idea that the biblical scholar went out on a blind date with a social scientist or just picked a theory or method that seemed to fit the goals. A volume like the one under consideration, therefore, is more than welcome to clear the grounds and offer perspectives for future research. Saul Olyan must be praised for convening the Ruth and Joseph Moskow Symposium in 2010 and for editing the proceedings of that meeting.

After an introduction by the editor (1–6), the volume opens with a review by Robert R. Wilson, “Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion” (7-17). In this well-written essay he makes clear that, after a first wave of biblical studies informed by social sciences in the first decades of the twentieth century, a “second” wave emerged between 1965 and 1980. In this wave two focal points can be indicated: a more sociological approach that starts in theory and uses the data derived from the Hebrew Bible and “Israelite” archaeology to test a thesis and a more anthropological or ethnographic approach that starts in the evidence and looks for patterns. These two tracks are still present in more
contemporary studies, with Rainer Albertz and Richard Horsley as the polar ends. Correctly, Wilson warns against a haphazard use of theories and models from the social sciences. He ends his paper with a comment to biblical scholars to consciously choose and apply these theories. His final remark that we—biblical scholars—have to look for the correct “match” between problem and model is, unfortunately, quite necessary.

Susan Ackerman offers a lengthy essay: “Cult Centralization, the Erosion of Kin-Based Communities, and the Implications for Women’s Religious Practice” (19–40), in which she studies the effects for participation of women in cult(s) of the Josianic reforms. She is applying Weberian concepts on nation, community, and sib, or clan. She summarizes the works of Baruch Halpern and Joseph Blenkinsopp, who both argue that women’s roles in the cult were marginalized as a result of the concentration of the cult in Jerusalem. Ackerman reads three stories from the book of Samuel that are seen as informative on pre-Josianic annual festivals of the clan. Of these stories, only 1 Sam 20 can be construed as referring to such a festival. The other two examples (1 Sam 1; 9) have more national and political traits. In 1 Sam 20, women already play a very marginal role. Next Ackerman analyses the data on the participation of women in ancestor veneration. Here she arrives at the conclusion that women were never involved in this veneration, on both ends: there is no mention of deified women ancestors of women venerating the (male) ancestors. All this leads to her view that the Josianic reform had no effect on the participation of women, since that participation already was marginal. Ackerman’s argument is not completely convincing at this point. She fails to explain why Leah and Rachel were hiding the teraphim, to be seen as ancestor icons. She overlooks the role of Rachel in Jer 31. More important, Francesca Stavrakopoulou has argued that in the famous vow of Ruth to Naomi the ’elohim should be construed as ancestors. In my view, the book of Ruth indicates the role of women’s participation in the ancestor cult.

In his contribution, “The Levites and Socio-cultural Change in Ancient Israel” (41–58), Stephen Cook applies the insight of the sociologist Gerhard Lenski for a reconstruction of the history of the Levites. Lenski operates with an evolutionary scheme in which ongoing development leads to internal tensions. Cook makes clear that ancient Israel went through a process from an agrarian society to a more stratified advanced agrarian

---

1. Ironically spelled “Erosian” in the table of contents, creating an unexpected link to a character from the land of Star Wars fiction.
society during the Iron Age. This development inevitably led to tensions within the society of ancient Israel. On the basis of what Cook classifies as data, he constructs a movement in which the Levites were torn between center and periphery after the Josianic reform. This implies that the Levites at times voiced criticism against the views of the elite around court and temple but on other occasions were entangled in power positions. This is an interesting view that is based, however, on cast-iron evidence. What Cook presents as “data” is often the view of another scholar to whom he stands sympathetic.

Ronald Hendel’s “Away from Ritual: The Prophetic Critique” (59–79) explores the prophetic critique of the traditional cult as voiced, for instance, in Amos 5:21–24. He makes clear that well-intentioned endeavors to smooth the dichotomy between “cultic practice” and “religious morality”—although having a positive effect on post–WW II ecumenical debates—miss the point. The prophetic critique should be construed as contesting religious identities. He underscores this view by bringing in Bourdieu’s concept of doxa. The cultic rituals of ancient Israel are to be seen as examples of unquestionable assumptions and practices of everyday life. The prophets are seen by Hendel as individual antiritualists who in their negative response to the doxa of their days made clear that this doxa had run aground and was no longer self-evident. Therefore, they proposed to replace it by new forms.

T. M. Lemos, “‘They Have Become Women’: Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration” (81–109), relates in lengthy sentences and meandering arguments that biblical scholars have an inclination to either ignore anthropological theory and ethnographic data or make only an arbitrary and theory-laden use of them. She then presents a selection of postcolonial theories of empire, migration, and gender that could, in her opinion, be helpful in understanding the Judean (forced) migration to Babylon. She applies these insights in a reading of passages from the books of Ezekiel and Daniel. To my surprise, she seems to have overlooked the work of John Ahn.

Recent years have shown a growing interest in the development of writing and literacy in ancient Israel. The emerging picture is quite static: text production is construed as part of a process of stabilization and conservation. In “Text Production and Destruction in

Ancient Israel: Ritual and Political Dimensions” (111–39), Nathaniel Levtow opts for a quite different position. He argues for the view that text production was a function of cultural production and change. He underscores this view with a surprising argument, since he is looking at the processes that accompanied text destruction. In the Hebrew Bible three narratives on destruction are found: the cutting and burning of a scroll (Jer 36); the smashing of tablets (Exod 32); and the sinking of a scroll (Jer 51). Levtow adds to that the warning against destroying of the tablet in the vassal treaties (or loyalty oaths) of Esarhaddon. If I understand him correctly, he seems to argue that the fear for losing a power position that is present in and around these four texts is revealing about the composition of texts: the served the interests of a changing society. I am not immediately convinced by his “mirror” argument.

In a well-written contribution entitled “The Function of Feasts: An Anthropological Perspective on Israelite Religious Festivals” (141–68), Carol Meyers engages recent research in ethnography and anthropological archaeology on the functions of feasts and festivals. After a short introduction, she presents the views of biblical scholars on this topic, making clear that even in the excellent work of Nathan MacDonald still much is left unstudied. Next she argues that regular and calendrical festivals in ancient Israel—although with local variations—have remained their character over the ages. I would add only that, since ancient Israel from the Iron Age II up to Hellenistic times was a slowly developing agrarian society, the yearly festivals also were part of the longue durée. Meyers correctly remarks that the participation of women in these festivals would have been marginal. Finally, she describes the various functions of these festivals using the windows of economy, culture, community, and identity.

In his own contribution, “Theorizing Violence in Biblical Ritual Contexts: The Case of Mourning Rites” (169–80), Saul Olyan discusses four passages from the Hebrew Bible that contain elements of violence in the context of mourning rites. In 2 Sam 10 David’s emissaries to the mourning court in Ammon meet violence from the Ammonites who want to end the treaty relationship; 2 Sam 16 narrates acts of violent revenge by the Saulide Shimei; Neh 13 makes clear that violence played an important role in the new network of affiliations constructed by Nehemiah; in Isa 50 the victimizers seek to force their opponent into a penitential mourning posture. All four texts fit the pattern of recent cross-cultural theorizing on violence, with one exception: the biblical stress that violence is not rational but rather based on impulsive, irrational, and meaningless behavior.

Rüdiger Schmitt, in “Theories Regarding Witchcraft Accusations and the Hebrew Bible” (181–94), pays attention to the phenomenon of witchcraft accusation from a cross-cultural perspective. He concentrates on the ideas of Riekje Pelgrim and Peter Geschiere. In his view such theories have some potential for understanding ancient Near Eastern materials. He is fully aware of the distinctiveness of each case. He considers texts such as Nah 3, Isa 47, and 2 Kgs 9 as presenting literary tales on witchcraft accusation. Ezekiel 13 is more reality-related. In this text the witch is to be seen as a representative of a rival faction. Am I old-fashioned when I observe the absence of the ideas of René Girard in this respect?

David Wright’s “Ritual Theory, Ritual Texts, and the Priestly-Holiness writings of the Pentateuch” (195–216) rounds off the volume with a learned essay on the interrelation between ritual theories and the descriptions of rituals in the P-H “source.” His conclusion contains a disillusion: there is no formal fit between the two. He therefore invites biblical scholars to acts of creativity to bring them together in order to better understand the Priestly-Holiness material on ritual.

What is the harvest of this volume? That cannot be phrased in one sentence. As for future research, I would very much propose interdisciplinary projects. We as biblical scholars need to be aware of the limits of our knowledge and competences. Rather than going out on a blind date by picking at random theories, methods, and hypotheses from this adjacent field, we should tempt the social scientists at our institutions to cooperate. Nevertheless, the present volume is a real mind-opener and could be used as a valuable textbook in a postgraduate course on ritual, religion, and social sciences.

---
