

SOCIAL THEORY AND THE  
STUDY OF ISRAELITE RELIGION

ESSAYS IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

*Edited by*  
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Society of Biblical Literature  
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SOCIAL THEORY AND THE STUDY OF ISRAELITE RELIGION  
Essays in Retrospect and Prospect

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## INTRODUCTION

*Saul M. Olyan*

Social theory and the study of Israelite religion have had a long and fruitful relationship. Classics such as Paul D. Hanson's *Dawn of Apocalyptic* (1979), Norman K. Gottwald's *Tribes of Yahweh* (1979), Robert R. Wilson's *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (1980), and Carol Meyers's *Discovering Eve* (1988) utilized social theory extensively, setting the stage for more recent work making use of classical and contemporary theory.<sup>1</sup> This volume, which grows out of a symposium at Brown University during the winter of 2010, is intended both to assess past, theoretically engaged work on Israelite religion, and to provide a forum for the presentation of new approaches to particular problems and to larger, interpretive and methodological, questions. The volume gathers together previously unpublished research by senior and mid-career scholars well known for their contributions in this area of study, and by junior scholars whose writing is just beginning to have a serious impact on the field. It begins with an essay by Robert Wilson that assesses some of the contributions made by theoretically engaged biblical scholars to the study of Israelite religion during the

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1. Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). As Robert Wilson points out in his essay in this volume, the modern relationship between social theory and the study of Israelite religion goes back to the nineteenth century. Thus the classics I mention here are all of relatively recent vintage, part of what scholars often refer to as the “second wave” of biblical scholarship engaging the social sciences (“Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: A Retrospective on the Past Forty Years of Research”).

past half century, points to continuities and disjunctures in their engagement with social theory, and identifies areas in need of further development (e.g., more critical reflection on how theory is chosen). Nine other studies follow, each of which engages social theory critically as it explores particular problems or themes.

Susan Ackerman examines cult centralization and its sociopolitical implications through the lenses of kinship and gender, assessing the theories of Max Weber and the work of several contemporary scholars who have elaborated upon Weber's ideas (Baruch Halpern and Joseph Blenkinsopp). By showing that women's participation in the annual clan sacrifice to the ancestors was in the main unaffected by centralization—since the role of women in such a sacrifice was very likely minimal to begin with—she complicates arguments that centralization necessarily eroded all aspects of local, kin-based cult, including the practices of women.

Stephen L. Cook evaluates Gerhard Lenski's theoretical insights into social change and the tensions it produces as he reconsiders the shifting role of the Levites in Israelite cult and society, who struggle to respond to their marginalization by forces of the increasingly centralized state through their promulgation of Deuteronomy.

Ronald Hendel considers the prophetic critique of cultic rites in light of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *doxa* and Mary Douglas's ideas about the social and conceptual characteristics of antiritualists, who respond negatively to the "implicit meanings" or "self-evident truths" (*doxa*) embraced by the majority. In contrast, they find support in their own set of *doxa* and the social relationships that undergird these assumptions and practices.

T. M. Lemos identifies postcolonial theories of empire, migration, and gender that she finds useful for understanding the Judean diaspora, while criticizing both the less than salutary use of theory and ethnographic data by some biblical scholars and the wholesale dismissal of them as a resource by others. Her paper includes some very apt observations on what she believes to be appropriate method for biblical scholars who seek to make use of social theory or ethnography.

Eschewing theoretical models that posit an oral/written dichotomy, Nathaniel B. Levtow explores the ritual and sociopolitical dimensions of the production and destruction of texts in ancient Israel in a novel way, bringing into relief their destabilizing and potentially transformative potential, and thereby challenging the notion that the process of textualization is necessarily a conservative phenomenon intended to preserve tradition.

Carol Meyers critically engages recent research in ethnography and anthropological archaeology in order to consider the social/socioeconomic and political/politico-economic functions of Israelite seasonal festivals.

I assess the potential cross-disciplinary utility of recent theoretical work on violence in social anthropology through a study of the role of violence in biblical mourning contexts.

Rüdiger Schmitt considers witchcraft accusations in the Hebrew Bible in light of several theories of witchcraft (from social anthropology and medieval and early modern European history), subjecting such theories to critical assessment and finding that they have potential for insight into ancient West Asian materials, though this is limited by contextual differences.

Rounding out the volume, David P. Wright explores in some depth the challenges inherent in applying theoretical models and social-scientific methods to ritual texts with the Priestly-Holiness complex as his major focus, suggesting ways in which theory might nonetheless be helpful to the biblical scholar.

Though the contributors to this volume explore a wide range of topics, their essays suggest an interest in common themes. Issues of gender are central to the studies of Ackerman, Lemos, and Schmitt; social change is a major focus of the papers of Ackerman and Cook; an interest in the relationship of text and ritual characterizes the investigations of Levtow and Wright; the dynamics of shame and honor are treated by Lemos, Levtow, and Olyan; and the contributions by Ackerman, Hendel, and Meyers have festival life as a focus.

The papers in this volume also share common characteristics. Some focus on the work of a single theorist such as Lenski or Weber (Cook, Ackerman), or a pair of theorists such as Douglas and Bourdieu (Hendel), and evaluate, either explicitly or implicitly, the utility of the work for understanding biblical materials. Others consider a range of theoretical work on a particular topic (Lemos, Levtow, Meyers, Olyan, Schmitt). The theory may come from social or cultural anthropology (Hendel, Lemos, Meyers, Olyan, Schmitt), sociology (Ackerman, Cook), postcolonial studies (Lemos; Wright briefly), ritual studies (Levtow, Wright), or it may represent some combination of theoretical models of varying provenance (Levtow, Schmitt, Wright).

Several of the contributors to the volume conclude that the theoretical model(s) they consider, or some aspect(s) of it (them), can be confirmed or upheld on the basis of the biblical data as these scholars interpret it

(Cook, Hendel, Olyan, Schmitt, Wright). Some challenge theory on the same basis, bringing into relief its limitations (Ackerman, Cook, Lemos, Levtow, Olyan, Schmitt, Wright) and suggesting ways in which it might be modified or adapted in order to increase its utility for biblical studies (Ackerman, Olyan, Wright). Yet all conclude, either explicitly or implicitly, that engagement with theory can enrich our understanding of Israelite religion, and often does so.

None of the contributors to this volume allows theory to predetermine or overly influence conclusions regarding the data set in question, a tendency witnessed all too frequently among biblical scholars who have worked with social theory in the past. Privileging of theory vis-à-vis the ancient primary data has resulted in work that has been subjected to serious and justified criticism. One example of such criticism is Theodore Lewis's critique of Brian Schmidt's use of sub-Saharan African and Native American ethnography on the feeding of the dead and conclusions derived from it—that the dead are necessarily weak if they receive food—to understand ancient West Asian (including Israelite) provisioning of ancestors.<sup>2</sup> The many critical reactions to Norman Gottwald's use of the peasant revolt model to explain Israel's origins is another important example.<sup>3</sup> In each case, the contributors to this collection engage theory critically, carefully considering its utility for understanding the materials of interest in light of the materials themselves and what they communicate. In a word, they tend as a group to do what Robert Wilson and T. M. Lemos call for in their essays in this volume: they select their theoretical material carefully and self-consciously and assess critically its value as they engage it. Even if the

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2. Theodore J. Lewis, "How Far Can Texts Take Us? Evaluating Textual Sources for Reconstructing Ancient Israelite Beliefs about the Dead," in *Sacred Time, Sacred Place: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (ed. Barry M. Gittlen; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 189–202; Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996).

3. See, e.g., Wilson's characterization of Gottwald's work as a "classic Marxist scenario" in his essay in this volume and the comments of J. F. Priest, "Sociology and Hebrew Bible Studies," in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (excerpted from the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 283: "It has ... been sharply criticized as being a pure construct with no biblical evidence to support it." For other reactions to Gottwald's book, some negative, some positive, see, e.g., Roland Boer, ed., *Tracking "The Tribes of Yahweh": On the Trail of a Classic* (JSOTSup 351; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).



theory in question is found to be helpful in its received form, it has nonetheless been subjected to critical evaluation and not simply embraced and “applied” uncritically and unself-consciously to the data.

Similarly, contributors who utilize modern ethnographic materials have assessed them for their appropriateness and understand them to be at most suggestive rather than determinative (see, for example, Meyers’s comments on the appropriateness of using ethnography from agricultural societies when studying Israelite life and on the likelihood of gender inclusivity in Israelite festival participation). Theory might suggest new topics for exploration, or possible connections that might not otherwise occur to the researcher; it might raise new, potentially fruitful questions.<sup>4</sup> But its utility must be evaluated on the basis of the scholar’s reading of the relevant primary data, and theory can (and should) be reworked on that basis to increase its utility, or rejected if it cannot be usefully reformulated.

An important example of this process of evaluation and—in this particular case—rejection is Stephen L. Cook’s *Prophecy and Apocalypticism* (1995). In this study, the author not only critiques Paul Hanson’s use of deprivation theory from sociology (e.g., that of Karl Mannheim and Max Weber) to reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of apocalyptic literature, but concludes that deprivation theory itself is inadequate to the task of explaining both the biblical data and later ethnographic data from some millennial groups.<sup>5</sup> As Cook’s study demonstrates, there are rather unsalutary consequences to privileging theory at the expense of the ancient data, though happily these can be avoided with a more balanced approach to both theory and primary evidence.

Theorizing is increasingly becoming an interdisciplinary project, and one to which we biblical scholars can contribute on the basis of our own data sets. We and others who study the ancient world cannot observe, interview, or interrogate living and breathing subjects, and we are not in a position to contribute to the theoretical projects of anthropologists or sociologists, not being anthropologists and sociologists ourselves (see similarly the remarks of Lemos and Schmitt in this volume). We do, however, have access to texts and material data from which we can assess the larger

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4. See similarly Priest, “Sociology and Hebrew Bible Studies,” 283, 284.

5. Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*. The work of Otto Plöger (*Theokratie und Eschatologie* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1968]), which influenced Hanson, is also assessed by Cook.

utility of theoretical formulations from other disciplines, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary theorizing of topics such as ritual, gender, race, disability, foodways, and violence. Of course, we can also opt to theorize exclusively for our own discipline should our goals be less ambitious. We can engage theory fruitfully even if our data is textual in nature as long as we acknowledge the goals of the texts (e.g., to innovate), the limits of what we can learn from them, and how they might differ in nature from the data upon which theorizing in the social sciences is often based (Wright). As the example of Cook's challenge to deprivation theory and the essays in this volume demonstrate, biblical scholars can contribute decisively to theorizing, including the assessment of theory, its reformulation, and, if necessary, its rejection.

On a final note, it is my pleasure to acknowledge the sponsors of the gathering out of which this volume has emerged, the 2010 Ruth and Joseph Moskow Symposium. The Program in Judaic Studies at Brown University, which hosts the yearly Moskow Symposium, was the event's primary sponsor. The conference received additional support and cosponsorship from the Department of Egyptology and Ancient West Asian Studies, the Program in Ancient Studies, and the Department of Religious Studies. I am deeply grateful to each of these units and their chairs, David Jacobson, James Allen, John Bodel, and Susan Harvey, for providing the financial backing that made the gathering possible. I would also like to acknowledge Jill Blockson for her hard work on the logistics during the final months before the symposium, and Thea Levy for her generosity in establishing the Moskow fund to honor the memory of her parents. Finally, I offer my thanks to each of the contributors to the volume.