

Chapter 2

Current approaches within the field of the social-scientific study of the New Testament

2.1 Orientation

The nineteen-seventies heralded a renewed interest in the social background of the New Testament documents. A fresh approach was indicated – compared to earlier related efforts (see section 2.2 below) – by an appropriation by biblical scholars of the theoretical and methodological insights provided by the social sciences – sociology, anthropology and psychology. To orientate the reader, the differences between sociology, anthropology and psychology could briefly be summed up as follows (see 3.5 below for a more elaborate discussion):

Sociology is formally defined as the scientific study of all systems of social interaction (Steyn & Van Rensburg 1985:7). *Social interaction* is seen as the basic generic social phenomenon – from it all other social phenomena arise (Steyn & Van Rensburg 1985:6). An important aspect of this interaction is that it becomes routinized as ‘a necessary condition for society as an ongoing enterprise’ (Berger & Berger 1976:16). This routinization brings order and predictability into the interaction, so that the patterns of interaction form a system. A *system* refers to a certain relationship and interdependency between complexes of empirical phenomena. This relationship and interdependency between the different components results in the internal order or unity of the system. Furthermore, each component attributes to the dynamic and orderliness of the total system. A system, therefore, has two aspects:

- i) A structural aspect, comprising interaction patterns that consist of specific components and are interrelated to each other.
- ii) A functional aspect, comprising the contribution made by these components to the dynamic and functioning of the system as a whole.

Sociology is not primarily interested in individual personality or behaviour, but in systems of interaction – that is, social forms and structures such as groups, communities and societies within which man behaves in an orderly and regulated fashion.

While the discipline of sociology is mostly interested in the general structures and functions of social phenomena within the *own* group, *anthropology* directs its attention more specifically towards the economic, linguistic, religious, and other institutions of *alien* groups.

Other than sociology and anthropology, both of which are directed towards collectivities, *psychology* is primarily interested in individual personality and behaviour, *as influenced by the social circumstances to which man is exposed* (Cilliers & Joubert 1966:15).

2.1.1 Chapter outline

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to investigate the work of a few prominent scholars that have taken up the social-scientific study of the New Testament.¹ The discussion does not pretend to be an exhaustive critical appraisal, but rather a survey of the different possibilities that are currently employed. This will be done by way of a treatment under rubrics, which will be used as a template under which to read and evaluate the works chosen for discussion. First, the literary approach of the authors will be considered. Second, their understanding and exposition of those aspects of sociological theory that form the basis of their work will be discussed, as well as their choice and application of interpretive models, that is, the methodological procedure followed in the works.

The major works of the following authors, representing the mainstream of the social-scientific study of the New Testament, will be assessed: John H Elliott, John G Gager, Bruce J Malina, Wayne A Meeks, Norman R Petersen, Gerd Theissen.

2.2 Roots of the social-scientific study of the New Testament

Interest in the situational context of the biblical documents and the traditions which they contain, is not new. Well-known attempts at a sociological interpretation of early Christianity are the *Marxist reading* (Scroggs 1980:177-179) and the *Chicago school of New Testament studies* (Funk 1976:4-22), both of which have been implicitly or explicitly reductionist in postulating social causes for all religious phenomena (Schütz 1982:3-11; Meeks 1983:3). Also, the so-called *form-critical school* had an enquiry into the socio-historical background of a text as part of its exegetical programme as early as the beginning of the century.

Form criticism (Formgeschichte) is part of the historical-critical approach. It arose as a reaction to the so-called *Literargeschichte*, a literary-critical approach that sought to shed some light on the origins and growth of New Testament literature, especially the Gospels, from their inception to their completion. This goal the *Literargeschichte* could not attain, because it was usually applied either to the literary work, or to the process of oral traditions being transformed into literature. Either a literary appraisal was made of the documents, or they were subjected to a source analysis (Hahn 1985:427 note 2). It was the task of form criticism to divert this singular concentration on the origins of the textual unit to other areas of interest, in order to remedy the one-sidedness of the *Literargeschichte* and to expand the scope of investigation to include matters of social importance. *Hermann Gunkel* is acknowledged as the father of the form-critical method, as he first applied it to the Old Testament (Tucker 1971:4-6). Hahn (1985:441) states of Gunkel:

Sein Methodenkonzept ist, inspiriert von Herder, anhand der Untersuchung biblischer Texte erwachsen. Von besonderer Bedeutung ist, dass die formgeschichtliche Analyse der Überlieferung hier gleichzeitig als Frage nach der aus Stoff und Form sich bestimmenden Gattung *und* als Frage nach dem Sitz im Leben in Angriff genommen wird.

Form criticism, as exegetic method applied to the Old Testament, was not identical in its application to the New Testament (cf Hahn 1985:442; Schütz 1982:8-9). That is why *Martin Dibelius* is described as the one with whom the New Testament strand of form criticism originated (Hahn 1985:442). Form-critical investigations into the *Sitz im Leben* of texts and traditions of the New Testament were also conducted by K L Schmidt and R Bultmann (cf Hahn 1985:1-255, 442-454; Zimmermann 1967:128-134), in order to obtain information about the world extraneous to the text, information that could aid their understanding of the texts. Dibelius ([1929]) formulated the task of form criticism as follows:

Die Formgeschichte hat es bekanntlich nicht mit den abgeschlossenen literarischen Werken zu tun, sondern mit den kleinen Einheiten, die in mündlicher oder schriftlicher Überlieferung weitergegeben werden, deren Kenntniss wir aber freilich aus Büchern schöpfen, in die sie Aufnahme gefunden haben...Die Formgeschichte stellt sich vielmehr die grössere und schwierigere Aufgabe, Entstehung und Geschichte dieser Ein-

zelstücke zu rekonstruieren, somit die Geschichte der vorliterarischen Überlieferung aufzuhellen, und – im Falle der Synoptiker – eine art ‘Paläontologie der Evangelien’ (K L Schmidt nach Overbeck in RGG² II, 638) zu schaffen.

(Hahn 1985:23-24)

It is an assumption of form criticism, therefore, that a segment of traditional material can be identified first of all by its form. This form is associated with a specific situation, as a result of its repeated use in that situation. An analysis of the form and content of such traditional material ought therefore to tell us something about the situation that gave birth to it. Dibelius (in Hahn 1985:24) states:

Formgeschichte kann also nur von der Voraussetzung aus getrieben werden, dass die Form jener Einheiten etwas über ihre Herkunft verrate und dass die Geschichte der vorliterarischen Überlieferung sich nach gewissen immanenten, nicht lediglich von schriftstellernden Personen abhängenden Gesetzen vollziehe. Die formgeschichtliche Betrachtung ist also bewusst antiindividualistisch und soziologisch....

In order to determine whether and how present-day sociological investigations of the New Testament literature are related or indebted to the *Sitz im Leben* approach, one must establish what the form critics meant by the term ‘soziologisch’. Is John Schütz (1982:10) correct when he says that ‘the sociological interest latent in form criticism makes it apparent that current attention to social questions is but continuous with the recent past of biblical scholarship’? Theissen (1982:186), it seems, sees in the sociological approach a continuance of the form-critical *Sitz im Leben* investigations (see also Osiek 1984:3).

2.2.1 Naïve description of social settings

The *Sitz im Leben* interest was concerned with collecting ‘explicit evidence as to social and historical context’ (Elliott 1981:3; see also K Berger 1977:219), and used the data for a *social description* of the presumed reconstructed socio-historical background of the texts.

The same could be said about earlier investigations – termed ‘social’ or ‘socio-historical’ – by scholars such as Lohmeyer, Von Dobschütz, Troeltsch, Matthews and Case (cf Scroggs 1980:164-165; Schütz 1982:3-11, 21 notes 5 and 16; Osiek 1984:3). The interest was primarily historical in character for theological relevance,

and practically nothing can be found in those publications on the subject of social-scientific theory and/or method (Meeks 1983:3). This earlier approach could therefore be termed a *naïve description of social setting*, whereby social information was used to undergird and supplement historical supposition. Klaus Berger (1977:219) deems this (i.e. collecting explicit social evidence for a socio-historical description) a questionable approach:

Viele Texte des NT sind für diese Fragen wenig ergiebig. Die Ebene theologischer Traditionen wird weder tangiert noch erklärt, das Zusammenwirken von Theologie und Situation kann kaum in den Blick kommen.

In a qualified sense, then, the modern social-scientific approach to the New Testament can be termed both a *continuance* and a *discontinuance* of earlier socio-historical investigations (Schütz 1982:3). It is a *continuance* in so far as it values knowledge of the social setting of the text as the frame of reference within which to understand the text. It is a *discontinuance* in that it is not primarily interested in reconstructing history, or even in theology, but it is eminently interested in interpreting the substance and/or content of texts that relate to the disciplines of sociology, anthropology or psychology (cf 2.1 above). For this reason it avails itself of the sophisticated theoretical and methodological constructs of these disciplines. It is also a *discontinuance* in so far as it endeavours not to be reductionist, a charge that some of the earlier approaches could not escape, mainly because of their lack of social-scientific epistemology (see section 2.2 above).

2.3 Current state of the discipline

In contrast to the social description for historical relevance that resulted from earlier studies with a social interest (Harris 1984:102-103; see 2.2 above), the renewed interest by biblical scholars in the social dimension of texts from the outset stated its intention to take cognizance of and utilize the theoretical concepts and empirical methods of the scientific disciplines of sociology, anthropology and psychology, in order to *explain* the productive societal powers that gave rise to the biblical documents. The whole purpose of such an undertaking would be to better understand the text of the Bible. There being no previous guidelines along which to proceed, a theoretical basis and methodological structure for the application of sociological, anthropological and psychological principles to the texts of the Bible had to be constructed. The bewildering diversity of quantitative and qualitative methods and models that these disciplines present, has led to all kinds of exploratory work within the exegetical subdiscipline that has come to be known as the sociology of the New

Testament. Different scholars have opted for different approaches, methods and models in trying to uncover new information on the social background of the New Testament (cf Smith 1975:19-21; Scroggs 1980:167-171; Best 1983:187-190; Edwards 1983:431-444; Harrington 1988:77-85).

In the gathering momentum of publications on this new field of interest, the indiscriminate use of the terms 'social' and 'sociological' resulted in the equating of *social description* with *social-scientific explanation* (cf Elliott 1981:3; Malina 1982:241; Osiek 1984:4-6). This is unfortunate, because a genuine social-scientific approach operates on a different level from that of social description. Best (1983:185) distinguishes between two levels of application of social-scientific categories to the New Testament, namely *description* and *explanation* (see also Gager 1979:175), and states:

For a truly sociological approach, however, one must move to the second level, that of *explanation*. Here the tools and techniques of modern sociological study are used, not merely to describe but also to probe the inner dynamics of the early Christian movement, regarded not as a unique event but as an example of patterns of behaviour which may be widely observed and objectively studied.

(Best 1983:185)

Gager (1982) has shed even more light on the issue. Referring to an article by Smith (1975:19-20) in which no less than *four* different approaches within this field were distinguished, Gager reserved the description 'sociological' or 'social-scientific' for the approach that, according to Smith, encompassed 'an analysis of Christianity as a social world, as the creation of a world of meaning which provided a plausibility structure for those who chose to inhabit it' (Smith 1975:19-20; cf Domeris 1988:379). Gager states that only such an approach:

...can be properly characterized as sociological or, more broadly, social scientific, for it is only here that specific academic disciplines – sociology, anthropology and psychology – have contributed explanatory theories and hypotheses.

(Gager 1982:258)

It is clear, then, that there is a difference between the reference of the terms 'social' and 'sociological', and that this difference needs further clarification. The most logical way to start would be to take a more detailed look at the different approaches denoted by the above terms (see also 2.3 above), in order to be able to judge the work of the authors under consideration properly.

2.3.1 Social versus sociological approach

It has been noted by several scholars that some confusion exists as regards the reference of the above terms (cf Gager 1979:175; Gottwald 1982:143; Schütz 1982:1; Osiek 1984:4). The words have apparently been used interchangeably to refer to the study of any *explicit* data in the New Testament texts on any societal phenomena (both concrete and abstract) in the period of early Christianity, and mainly for the purpose of historical interest. This means that the question facing the interpreter changes from 'What did the author mean?' to 'Was there anything in the contemporary societal structure that this utterance could be a reflection of?' The texts are processed in this way until every scrap of information that might have some social relevance has been tagged and included in a database. Then the database itself is sorted into categories such as 'cultural', 'political', 'economical', and 'religious'. Each of these categories contains the information on the different social institutions that could be assigned to it. Finally, the accumulated information serves as a new source from which to extract the information needed to reconstruct any of the settings that could be deemed connected to an utterance in order to facilitate the understanding of that utterance. Corroboration for the reconstructed setting is sought from both biblical and nonbiblical literary sources from the same period, and from archaeological evidence (Osiek 1984:4). In this way a picture emerges of the time of the origin of early Christianity – a picture containing much detail already, and being added to all the time as new data emerge. This whole exercise, as well as the results that it may produce, is called by different names: *social analysis*, *social description*, *socio-historical approach*, *social history*, even *sociological analysis*. This is where the confusion starts, and it becomes imperative to delineate the reference of the terms.

The procedure described above can be termed a *social description* or *social history*, but *not* a sociological analysis. A social description *accumulates* data that it regards as relevant in order to contribute to the historical understanding of the background of the New Testament texts or text-segments (Harris 1984:105). When needed, pieces of the amassed information are fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. The structure of the text or the ideological point of view of the narrator or any other literary or *redaktionsgeschichtliche* concepts are of no consequence in this approach.

Texts are simply regarded as *sociological informants* of the most basic kind, containing unreflected social data on diverse subjects (see Domeris 1988:379-381 for a concise discussion of social descriptions and histories).

By the term *sociological analysis*, on the other hand, something completely different is meant. It is already clear from the discussion in 2.3 above, that 'sociological approach/analysis' refers to the implementation of methods of analysis and research based on epistemologies relevant to the social sciences. The term has a generic reference, but at the same time it applies to a specific discipline of the social sciences, namely sociology. For the sake of clarification it would therefore be better to replace it with the broader term, that is, *social-scientific analysis*. The purpose of such analysis, to my mind, is not simply to accumulate data. Depending on the end towards which the analysis is done – which is an exposition of the meaning of the narrative discourse as autonomous *object d'art* – it may utilize the results of the former method, while always striving to comprehend and explain the data. A social-scientific analysis *abstracts* data in the sense of unearthing, making explicit what is buried and implicit in the narrative discourse. An analogy to this process can be found in Genette's narratological theory (1980). He also abstracted the story (*récit*) from the narrative discourse (*histoire*). The analysis of the *récit* concerns the reciprocal relations between the characters (Van Aarde 1988c:238).

Methodologically speaking, the only *direct and explicit* social information we have for the contextual history of the text is the literary work itself, constituting a social fact. Social-scientific data within the narrative is not directly accessible or available for a historical (re)construction.² Such data have acquired the characteristics of *literary* elements, and should be analyzed as such. Translating such literary-social data into pure social data fit to be used in a historical (re)construction, is a rather complex procedure. It involves an integration of literary analysis and social-scientific analysis in a way that is beneficial to both disciplines, and, most of all, should deliver results that are able to stand up to critical evaluation. First, a thorough literary analysis should be made of the text, according to its type (i.e. narrative). Then, on the macro-social level of the relationship between ideas and social reality, the text can be analysed in terms of some macro-theory – Durkheimian, Weberian or Marxist. To use Theissen's terms, such a macro-sociological analysis could be termed a 'structural homologue'³ (Theissen 1978:26-27, 121 n 8; 1982:190) of the narrative analysis of the work. Then, on the micro-social level of the relationship between the author and the reader, and using the results of the macro-sociological analysis, the text can be analysed in terms of communications theory by means of interpretive models from the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. Such analysis would constitute a 'structural homologue' to the literary analysis of

reader response. Finally, the results from both the literary and the macro and micro-sociological analyses are used to interpret and explain not the *historical* world, but the *narrative* or *referential* world of the text. In other words, at this time the interpreter is still moving *within* the text.

Only now can the interpreter use the database constructed by the accumulation of explicit social data, and use it for the purpose of comparison. The explicit data is considered to constitute that which is normal, that is, the 'habitualized activity' associated with the 'typificatory schemes' that apply to everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1967:28-31, 53-54). The narrative world, created by the text, should be compared to the everyday historical world to which the text belongs in order for those elements within the narrative world that are new, different or strange, to be discernible and identifiable. Only on the basis of the information procured in this way can we begin to make inferences about the social setting for which the text was intended.

2.4 Approach to the literature of the New Testament

Whatever we know is mediated by a language, if not by the language in which we know it. And if language is the sine qua non instrument of knowing, the knowledge-seeker had better be in control of the instrument. Bad language generates bad thinking; and bad thinking is bad for whatever the knowledge-seeker does next.

(Sartori 1984:15)

The literary aspect, to my mind, is of primary importance in the process of extracting social-scientific information from a text (1.1.2). Some relationship must exist between a text and the society from which it evolved (1.1-1.1.1.5). If a literary text is taken as some sort of one-on-one 'commentary' on society, whether positive or negative, the extraction and interpretation of social-scientifically relevant data from the text would be fairly simple. However, from personal experience and the work of literary critics we know that a literary work is not as unidirectional as that. The meanings and nuances conveyed in and by a literary work such as a narrative must first of all be related to the *narrative world* (cf Petersen 1978:38-40) that is constructed by the narrative, and not to the 'real', in the sense of 'historical', world. This 'narrative world' is analogous to the 'real world' in nearly every respect: there are social institutions in this world which stand in a specific relationship to one another; various characters, representing these institutions, are involved in a network of social relations; it is not a static picture-world, but a dynamic, functioning system, exhibiting all the interests, ideologies, tensions and conflicts that may exist in

the real, everyday world. However, there is one very important factor that should be noted when a social-scientific analysis of this 'narrative world' is to be undertaken: this world did not come about as a result of the usual formation processes of which the 'real' everyday world is a result (cf Berger & Luckmann 1967); it is, of necessity, a conceptualized world that originated in the mind of an author. However much it may *seem* to be a straightforward description of the historical world, according to the principles of narrative interpretation (Petersen 1978:38-40; 1985:5-7) one is not allowed to presume a one-on-one relationship between the narrative text and the historical world. Petersen (1985:5) is adamant that 'at the very beginning of our explorations we will have to decide whether we are going to explore the world of history or the world of story'.

According to Petersen (1978:15; 1985:5) a literary text 'is first and foremost evidence for the time in which it was written. It is a primary source for that time, but only a secondary source for the events referred to in it'. The issue at stake here is the distinction that is made between the *contextual history* (= the historical context) of the text, and the *referential history* (= the history referred to in the text). Petersen (1985:7) describes the reference of the above terms as follows:

Literary and historical critics are therefore in agreement when they associate the notion of context with the time of writing. But what in literary criticism corresponds to the history referred to in our narrative texts? In literary terms, this *referential history* comprises the *narrative world* of the text (or story). The narrative world is that reality which the narrator bestows upon his actors and upon their actions, a reality into which he authoritatively invites his audience, whether he is telling a fairy tale, a spy story, or a great novelistic adventure.

In view of the above it seems clear that a social-scientific analysis of, for instance, the gospel narratives, should be very precise about its goals and methods.

Should the goal of the analysis be to describe or (re)construct the social environment at the time of the historical Jesus, one could easily be tempted to take statements of social-scientific interest in the text as if they were a straightforward description of the history referred to. It should be kept in mind, however, that the narrative world of a text is only a secondary source for the referential history. In other words, in the case of the gospel narratives the authors employ material which refers to events that are – from their perspective – already historical. The purpose of the author in composing the narrative is to communicate some message to the

readers of *his own day* (see Malina 1982:229-230; 1983:120-131; 1986a:1-12, 166-167 on biblical narrative as communication). Therefore one cannot assume that the stories of Jesus and his disciples represented in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John directly represent history as it happened. Such an assumption would constitute a rather serious methodological fallacy, known as the 'referential fallacy' (Petersen 1978:38-40). Meanings and nuances conferred upon these statements by the author might be totally overlooked. 'The history of those events and lives has to be reconstructed from the stories that refer to them' (Petersen 1985:7; see also Malina 1983:120-129 on the question of 'inconsiderate' readers and writers).

Should the goal of a social-scientific analysis be to obtain some information on the *contextual world* of the text, the procedure would again be to first determine the meaning of a statement in terms of the narrative world, and afterwards to establish the reference to the extratextual context.⁴

In this section the authors under discussion will be reviewed with regard to the different points of view from which they approach the text as a literary composition, as they scan it for data relevant to a social-scientific analysis. These 'perspectives' are not meant to suggest that this is the sole angle of approach of any of the authors. It simply is a way of differentiating between the different approaches by means of some emphasis or inclination I have detected in their work. Therefore, by categorizing Theissen's approach to the literature a 'form-critical' one, it reflects an indebtedness to this method that I found in his work; and calling the approach of Elliott and Petersen a 'literary' one (cf below), it does not mean that their work goes begging for an understanding of communication theory – on the contrary! And, *mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the 'communications' perspective ascribed to Malina and Meeks.

2.4.1 Gerd Theissen

Elliott and Petersen have a predilection for the literary 'perspective' (2.4.5 and 2.4.6 below), and Malina and Meeks for the communications 'perspective' (2.4.3 and 2.4.4) in their respective approaches to the social-scientific study of the New Testament. *Theissen* concentrates on the acquisition of sociologically relevant material by means of an analysis of the text in the *form-critical tradition*, trying to uncover the *Sitz im Leben* by a 'constructive', 'analytic' or 'comparative' approach (Theissen 1982:177). He cites again the perception by classical form criticism 'that literary forms, as genre-specific norms for the shaping of texts, express social relationships' (Theissen 1982:186). For Theissen the importance of the text is not so much to be found in its literary structure as in its creative composition. He views the text as 'a kind of sociology' (cf 1.1.1.2), in which 'sociological statements' as such are absent

and 'pre-scientific sociological references' are scant, but 'historical, paraenetic, poetic, ecclesiological, and mythical statements' are present (Theissen 1982:176). Underlying this view is an understanding of literature whereby the creation of the gospels, their form, content, substance and message may all be regarded as social facts (cf Theissen 1982:182-186) or contradictions (cf Theissen 1982:181-182) or even as symbols (cf Theissen 1982:187-191). This represents a perception of the social genesis of literature in which there remains very little scope for the concept of an individual creative author who has received some traditional material, interpreted it, added redactional commentary to it and (re)arranged it in such a way as to create a completely new narrative with a thrust and ideology that suits the needs of his own community (see 1.1.1.3). In a more recent work, though, Theissen (1987) has shown himself to be not only knowledgeable (cf Theissen 1987:19, 27, 55, 83) about narrative exegesis, but also quite adept at using the powerful instrument of narrative persuasion. His interest, however, remains focused on the 'referential history' – as opposed to the 'contextual history' – of the text (see 2.4 and 2.4.1 above).⁵

2.4.2 John G Gager

In a short discussion of the importance of the work of redaction criticism Gager (1975:8-9) points out that redaction critics have sought to sketch a picture of the beliefs and practices, the concerns and presuppositions that gave to each Gospel its final shape. This they did by analysing a Gospel in terms of its general structure, thematic development, and literary style. They also distinguished between traditional material and its reinterpretation by the final author or editor. If the results of this kind of analysis are transposed 'into the framework of early Christianity as a new world coming into being, we may properly speak of the Gospels as religious or mythological charters' (Gager 1975:8). The Gospels may serve as sources for re-creating the social world of early Christianity. The Gospels themselves, of course, are based on sources, that is, contain inherited traditions. These traditions tended to influence the community's view of the world, and vice versa. Gager (1975:9) therefore regards the Gospels and their sources as 'models of as well as models for their respective groups'.

Apart from these observations, Gager says practically nothing about the (different types of) literature that he works with. His programme of re-creating the social world of early Christianity clearly belongs in the realm of social history, where the text is simply regarded as a receptacle full of socio-historical data.

2.4.3 Wayne A Meeks

Meeks (1972:68), like Malina, understands literature as a form of communication:

So long as we approach the Johannine literature as a chapter in the history of *ideas*, it will defy our understanding. Its metaphors are irrational, disorganized, and incomplete. But if we pose our questions in the form, What functions did this particular system of metaphors have for the group that developed it? then even its self-contradictions and its disjunctures may be seen to be a *means of communication*.

Meeks takes a different tack from that of Malina; he emphasizes the *functional* aspect of literature as a social force, that is, the reaction that the literary work elicits from its readers, while Malina places a greater emphasis on literature as a *social product*, that is, as containing data of social-scientific interest (cf 1.1.1.4 above). Meeks (1972:68-69; see also 1983:7) forcefully argues the point:

The reader cannot understand any part of the Fourth Gospel until he understands the whole. Thus the reader has an experience rather like that of the dialogue partners of Jesus...such an experience is grounded in the stylistic structure of the whole document. This is the way its language, composed of an enormous variety of materials, from the standpoint of the history of traditions, has been organized, partly by design, i.e., by the actual composition by the evangelist, and partly by pre-redactional collocation of the different ways of talking in the life of the community. *The book functions for its readers in precisely the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions within its narratives and dialogues* (emphasis by Meeks).

This means, according to Meeks (1972:69), that certain deductions about the Johannine community can be made by taking into account the structural characteristics of the literature. In this way the text itself, as a deliberately constructed entity for a specific purpose, becomes not merely a source of sociologically interesting information, but its structurality might be an indispensable clue to the understanding of its community. In more recent works (1982, 1983) Meeks, interestingly enough, gives

very little indication of his own assessment of the import of the composition of literary texts in the social-scientific investigation of early Christian origins.

2.4.4 Bruce Malina

Malina (1983:120) distinguishes between reading the Bible 'as a text containing communication from an author' and reading it 'as a documentary source containing historical information'. The reference here is to the *interpretation* of a text in order to try to understand the substance and the meaning of what the author was trying to say, and to the finding of historical data in order to set up a picture of some part of history. In both instances '...one uses the Bible as a piece of communication, as language. And using the Bible as historical record obviously requires a first step of interpretation, with interpretation being rooted in reading. Thus any use of the Bible as written text requires that it be read' (Malina 1983:120; see also 1982:229). It seems as though Malina is in agreement with Elliott here, but there is also a difference. Malina approaches the 'reading' of the Bible not from a *literary* perspective, but from a *communications theory* perspective (cf Malina 1983:120-128), according to which the communicative possibilities of a text are linked to the 'considerateness' of an author in writing against the background of his/her audience's social system: 'Should a writer depict scenarios that can in no way be rooted in his/her audience's social system, s/he can be fairly labelled an inconsiderate writer' (Malina 1983:122). This is so, because meaning can only be effectively communicated if both reader and writer share a common social system (Malina 1983:122). The argument implies, of course, that there could also be such a thing as an inconsiderate *reader*, that is one who is not sensitive to the social system of an author (Malina 1983:122).

Most of what Malina says here, can only be endorsed. That is why a social-scientific study is indispensable for the hermeneutic and exegetic task. However, when he labels the argument that a literary work of art has a life of its own a 'cute personification' (Malina 1983:132, note 16), and thereby presumably negates the possibility of polyvalence as an intrinsic quality of an autonomous text, one would have to disagree. Referring to the debate on this issue (see section 1.2.2 above), the autonomy and resulting multivalence of a literary text has been adequately demonstrated. Even people sharing the same social system can sometimes completely misunderstand one another. At the same time Malina is no doubt correct in his assessment that an effort by a later interpreter to share the social system of the writer would very much eliminate the 'wild blue yonder' as regards possible meanings for the text, and provide (additional) valuable constraints within which to interpret a text. His 'communications perspective', which is literary in nature, is closely related to the 'literary perspective' of Elliott and Petersen (cf 2.4.5 and 2.4.6 below).

2.4.5 John H Elliott

Stressing the fact that the biblical text has a social dimension which should receive greater attention during the exegetic task, Elliott suggests a two-pronged approach to the text for which he coins the term 'sociological exegesis' (Elliott 1981:7). By this he describes 'the analytic and synthetic interpretation of a text through the combined exercise of the exegetical and sociological disciplines, their principles, theories and techniques' (Elliott 1981:7-8). Perhaps Elliott's most important contribution concerning the methodological approach of a social-scientific investigation of Scripture is the statement:

...the literary text serves as the primary focus, starting point, and empirical control of sociological analysis...
The *textual* focus of the analysis distinguishes it from the wider diachronic scope of social history and from the synchronic analysis of an entire society at a given period.

(Elliott 1981:8)

This constitutes a choice for an analysis of the text as the methodological first step in the process of the social-scientific study of the New Testament, and is indicative of a social-scientific investigation of a text from a *literary* perspective.

2.4.6 Norman R Petersen

Petersen has established himself as an expert in the field of literary criticism in his work *Literary criticism for New Testament critics* (1978) and subsequent articles. In his work that relates specifically to the social-scientific investigation of New Testament texts, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the sociology of Paul's narrative world*, Petersen is quite clear about the importance he attaches to the application of literary-critical principles whilst conducting a 'sociological' investigation of a New Testament text (cf Petersen 1985:ix, 1, and especially 4-17). As has already been discussed in some detail (cf 2.2.2, 2.4, 2.4.1), Petersen urges very strongly that the interpreter should make a conceptual differentiation between two modes of worlds: the *narrative world*, which is a whole, complete world presented to the reader in and by a narrative, and which offers the reader the *only* way (cf Petersen 1987:5) to understand the *real, historical world* of which the narrative world is a reflection. An analysis of the text as a literary creation would therefore be a methodological first step in Petersen's social-scientific approach to the study of the New Testament (cf Petersen 1987:2-6 for a very clear and readable discussion on how to move from texts to their contexts).

Petersen has also been criticized on precisely his representations of reader(s), text, and extra-text (context), and the relations between them. According to Darr (1988:119; see also Hays 1987:175) Petersen's work exhibits a reaction against the excessive 'extrinsicity' of some historical-critical studies by attempting to dissociate the text from any contextual factors. At the same time Petersen asserts that the story is not the text but rather a construction by the one who reads the text (the reader). Darr (1988:120) states:

In a sense, then, Petersen's system is a curious and somewhat uneasy combination of New Criticism's insistence on an autonomous, autotelic text and reader-response criticism's assertion that the reader plays an important role in the production of literary meaning. In order to combine these two notions, Petersen must posit implicitly a suprahistorical reader, that is, one who comes to the text without presuppositions and expectations based on specific, historically-conditioned extra-textual knowledge. As a result...the gulf that separates modern readers from ancient readers is far too easily bridged...Petersen seems to suggest that, at least initially, the literary and historical tasks can be done separately. In fact they must be integrated from the outset.

Darr (1988:120) suggests that the modern critic is obliged to reconstruct from other ancient sources the contextual knowledge presupposed by the text in order to understand and explain the specific text.

I find Darr's criticism an oversimplification of Petersen's argument on the issues discussed above. Petersen is quite aware of the problems in this regard. He states:

...in my experience the tendency has been to give greater weight to the historical context constructed from several texts than to the text we want to understand. My concern, therefore, is to undertake a more exhaustive search *within* the text for information about its own historical context...A more rigorous rendering of this principle would be to say that a text is *the* foremost evidence for the time in which it was written, and therefore for purposes of historical construction it has methodological priority over other evidence for that time. To be sure, a dialectical assessment of all the evidence is

ultimately necessary. But at this stage...it is necessary to recover an appreciation of the text because it has become obscured by our greater appreciation of its context.

(Petersen 1984:38)

In fact – referring to the quotation from Darr above – Petersen does *not* implicitly posit a suprahistorical reader. He distinguishes between intratextually encoded readers, which are *literary functions*, and *actual* readers, who are historical persons that are to be inferred from the text and belong to its historical context (cf Petersen 1984:39). *Encoded* or *authorial* readers belong to the text's own interpretive context, while *actual readers* belong to other interpretive contexts (cf Petersen 1984:40). This means that a text cannot signify for non-authorial readers what it signifies for authorial readers (Petersen 1984:40), and therefore Petersen (1984:41) warns against the interpreter illegitimately substituting his/her interpretive context for that of the text. I am therefore in agreement with Petersen – against Darr – as far as his (Petersen's) approach to the text is concerned.

2.5 The role of social science theory

With regard to the social sciences, this 'enemy' (Gager 1982:256-257; see also Meeks 1983:6) that theologians have been espousing for some time has presented us with many 'brides' (seen from the masculine point of view!), and the advocates of such marriages have not been the picture of faithful monogamous 'husbands' either. In fact, a somewhat 'open-minded' attitude has been encouraged for getting acquainted with (and making use of) the different theoretical and methodological possibilities presented by sciences such as sociology, anthropology and psychology (cf Gager 1979:175; Meeks 1983:6). Such an attitude might suggest that we are part of a generation of explorers, and that a new and uncharted land has opened up before us. Exploring this land has so far been an uncoordinated affair – the social sciences have indeed presented us with many possibilities in terms of surveying (angles of perception) and charting (actual methods). Gottwald (1982:146) states:

...it is evident that these varied types and instances of social scientific biblical study focus on different aspects of the subject matter, operate on different levels of abstraction and concretion, and present methodological and theoretical pluriformity.

It is to be expected that sometime in the future all this effort will culminate in a method in which the different angles of perception will have been accommodated. In the meantime, though, the different approaches that are currently adopted should be described as being best to aid the *explanation* of the text.

2.5.1 Gerd Theissen

The importance of pioneering studies lies not so much in their elegance or sophistication as in the sheer power and effect of their breaking new ground, of imaginatively and boldly advancing where no one else before has trod. The initial path forged might not be straight or tidy, but a path it is indeed, a breakthrough, a way clear enough for others to follow. Theissen has macheted his way through a jungle and has constructed a set of Rube-Goldberg bridges. He has forged a path leading to fresh sources of water.

(Elliott 1986:10)

In his work entitled *Sociology of early Palestinian Christianity* (1978) Theissen uses the sociological method known as *functional analysis*. He analyses the texts in terms of roles, factors and functions in accordance with sociological insights into social dynamics (cf Theissen 1978:4). This entails that he scans the (designated) texts for information or data that can be construed as representing or reflecting matters of sociological interest. The aim of his study is to describe the Jesus movement in terms of its genesis, composition, conduct and influence. This is a purely descriptive and comparative study. In essence it is the same kind of enterprise as undertaken by the form-critical school in determining the *Sitz im Leben* of a specific phenomenon, albeit in this instance by means of the application of a scientifically constructed, verifiable method or interpretive model from the discipline of sociology.

Theissen (1978:1) makes a distinction between an analysis of roles – which investigates typical patterns of behaviour, an analysis of factors – which investigates the way in which this behaviour is determined by society, and an analysis of function – which investigates the effects of a group on society. He makes no attempt to find a social ‘first cause’, because economic, ecological, political and cultural factors cannot be separated in their reciprocal interaction.

In another essay on methodology, Theissen (1982:176-177; cf Malina 1982:238 for a similar view) states his conviction that a sociological statement seeks to

describe and explain interpersonal behavior with reference to those characteristics which transcend the personal.

First of all, then, a sociological question is less concerned with what is individual than with what is typical, recurrent, general. Second, it is less concerned with the singular conditions of a specific situation than with structural relationships which apply to several situations.

(Theissen 1982:177)

The procedure by means of which he proposes to accomplish the sociological task sketched in the quotation above, is that used in the form-critical analysis of texts (see Theissen 1982:177), by which he shows himself to be consistent in his indebtedness to the form-critical tradition for his whole approach (cf 2.4.1 above for his approach to the literature).

According to this procedure sociological information has to be extracted from the sources by a process of inference. Three different types of method may be distinguished (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:177; see also Osiek 1984:43):

Constructive conclusions are drawn from an evaluation of pre-scientific statements which give either *prosopographic* information about the background, status and roles of *individuals* (Scroggs 1980:174), or *sociographic* information about the programme, organization and patterns of behaviour of *groups, institutions, organizations and other larger communities*. According to Theissen (1982:177) there are very few sociographic statements about early Christian groups, while prosopographic statements about individuals are more numerous (Theissen 1982:178). In accordance with social-scientific methods of handling empirical data, such statements are to be assessed in terms of reliability, validity and representativeness (Theissen 1982:178).

Analytic methods afford an indirect approach to sociological information. Such methods are used – in the absence of explicit data – to draw inferences from statements about (recurrent) historical events (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:181-182), about conflicts between groups or over ethical and legal norms (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:182-186), and from religious symbols like literary forms and poetic modes of expression, e g parables, structural homologues, et cetera (cf Theissen 1978:3; 1982:187-191; see especially Theissen 1982:198 note 28 for a discussion on structural homologues).

Comparative methods are geared towards establishing what is typical for early Christianity. This can be done in one of two ways: either by analysing the *differences*

brought forward by a comparison between early Christianity and the surrounding culture, or by analysing the *analogies* between not only the said groups, but also between Christianity and any 'comparable movements, groups, or phenomena of whatever era' (Theissen 1982:192). According to Theissen (1982:192), therefore, it is possible to compare early Christianity to 'all messianic-chiliastic movements, where again and again we find comparable characteristics....' Theissen (1982:194) admits that 'the disadvantage of any such procedure relying on analogies is its relative lack of precision', but still thinks it worthy of investigation. It should be stated in critique against Theissen, however, that this admission negates his own remark about the social-scientific assessment of empirical data in terms of reliability, validity and representativeness (cf preceding discussion on 'constructive conclusions') – or is it a matter of inadequacy of theoretical explanation?

Concluding his discussion of methodology, Theissen (1982:195) remarks:

It is not necessary to emphasize that the prospect of achieving an approximate comprehension of the matter to be investigated, by means of adequate statements about it, depends on the plurality, and methodological independence, of various procedures for drawing inferences.

Readers amongst the scholarly community have complained about the lack of reference to social-scientific theory or conceptual models in most of Theissen's work (cf Gager 1979:175; Schütz 1982:15; Osiek 1984:45; Edwards 1983:435; Elliott 1986:11), which makes it difficult to evaluate his approach and the results of his studies. It is clearly recognized, however, that Theissen has a wide knowledge of social-scientific theory, and can use the aspects of it that are applicable to the material (see for instance Gager 1979:175; Scroggs 1980:174). According to Schütz (1982:16) Theissen is concerned about 'a general critical theory of religion which will also be responsive to the historian's perception of religious data....' Within the general critical theory Theissen's choice for *functionalist analysis* assigns to him an intermediate position between *phenomenological analysis* on the one hand, which proceeds from the assumption that religion has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from normal reality and therefore make it inaccessible to sociological analysis (cf Schütz 1982:16), and *reductionistic analysis* on the other hand, which assigns to all religious phenomena some non-religious origin, and which therefore exposes itself to the criticism of being reductionist (cf Schütz 1982:16; see Malina 1982:237 for a discussion of reductionism as the process of subsuming one model into another).

'Functionalism' as a methodological concept for sociological analysis proceeds from the theoretical assumption that the normal and desired condition for a group or society is to be in equilibrium, because a state of equilibrium is conducive to the proper and efficient functioning of the collective parts of society (cf Elliott 1985: 332). Functionalism distinguishes between 'manifest' and 'latent' functions, or, in Theissen's terms, 'subjective intention' and 'objective function' (cf Schütz 1982:17). According to this theory a religious phenomenon's subjective intention (= what it is meant to do) is not (necessarily) the same as its objective function (= what it does). Theissen limits his functionalist analysis to those aspects that serve basic social needs in a specific frame of reference (society); those needs are twofold: the production of order (that is, the integration of the members of that society), and the control and overcoming of conflict through change (cf Theissen 1978:2). Schütz (1982:17) states:

These polar opposites are not regarded as mutually exclusive virtues (or vices), as if viewed from an ideological presumption of what the social frame should be like. Instead, they are regarded as two ends of a continuum along which all social organisms seek an accommodation or balance of forces.

To this axis, marked by the ends integration-conflict, Theissen adds another axis, marked by the ends creative-restrictive functions of religion. This results in a 'grid of theoretical perspectives on religion on which he is able to locate most of the classical theories, and by means of which he can underline the centrality of the functionalist approach...' (Schütz 1982:18). For the different aspects compounded into this model, Theissen is dependent upon Durkheim, Marx, Berger & Luckmann, and Weber (cf Gager 1979:175). According to Theissen (1978:2; see also Edwards 1983:435) 'religion can be a social cement and an impulse towards renewal: it can intimidate people and force them to conform, or can help them to act independently. In primitive Christianity the innovative function of religion appears most clearly'.

Precisely because of this stance 'functionalism' should be much more 'palatable' in more conservative theological circles⁶ (although Kümmel 1985:343-348 severely criticizes Theissen), and very much in keeping with a position where the historical interests dominate and sociological data are intended to serve a historical reconstruction. It is therefore not surprising that Theissen has chosen this approach, considering what has been established about him already, namely his indebtedness and loyalty to the traditional historical-critical approach (see the preceding discussion; cf also 2.4.1 above). That is why it can be said that he leans more toward social history

than towards abstract sociological theory in his works (Schütz 1982:20; cf Harris 1984:107). It is also clear, though, that Theissen is not bound to one method – he himself has pleaded for the use of any method if it proves to have heuristic value (Theissen 1978:4-5; 1982:195; see also Scroggs 1980:166-167; cf Elliott 1986:10-26, for a detailed discussion and evaluation of Theissen's functionalist approach; Malina 1982:240 note 18 for criticism on Theissen's use of psychological models).

2.5.2 John G Gager

Gager (1975) published one of the first books in America to employ the social sciences in an investigation into the social setting of the early Church as portrayed in the New Testament (cf Edwards 1983:432). In this work, *Kingdom and community: The social world of early Christianity*, he set out to give a comprehensive sociological account of the social world in which early Christianity had its origins (cf Tidball 1983:26).

According to Harris (1984:107) Gager is 'more intentionally sociological than Theissen', although Edwards (1983:435) maintains exactly the opposite view: 'The work of Gerd Theissen...shows considerably deeper immersion in sociological method.' Be that as it may, Gager does use a variety of sociological and anthropological models, such as conflict theory, the interpretation of symbols, sociology of knowledge and, especially, the theory of cognitive dissonance (cf Gager 1975; see also Malina 1982:235, 1986c:35-55; Edwards 1983:433; Harris 1984:108). Gager uses a *comparative approach* (cf Harris 1984:108; see 2.5.1 above). He studies early Christianity by comparing it with *millenarian movements*, and reasserts his acceptance of the validity of such a comparison several years later: 'I remain convinced that the most important insights into the fundamental character of early Christianity are to be derived from anthropological and sociological studies of popular and millenarian religious movements which have nothing to do with the time or region of the New Testament' (Gager 1982:261). According to Osiek (1984:39) 'Gager attempts...to understand the dynamics of Jesus' ministry and the early years of the Church as a movement of dramatic expectation' (cf also Tidball 1983:27; see Gager 1982:261 notes 21,22,23 for bibliographic references to anthropological studies on millenarian movements). The validity of drawing such analogies between early Christianity and (modern) millenarian movements (like the cargo cults) is accepted by some (cf Osiek 1984:40) and disputed by others (cf Edwards 1983:434; Malina 1986c:55; Tidball 1983:37-40).

To account for the fact that early Christianity, unlike other millenarian movements, endured and even grew, Gager used the psychological theory of *cognitive dissonance* – a theory proposed by Festinger (1957) to describe the state brought about

in individuals by 'discrepancies between action and cognition' (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225). For example, a smoker who knows that smoking causes cancer but continues the habit, demonstrates an inconsistency between his overt behavior and his knowledge. He is engaging in counter-attitudinal behaviour and thereby becomes prone to cognitive dissonance.⁷

The following definitions of the concept are given:

- 'Cognitive dissonance may be described as "psychological tension having motivational characteristics" which occurs when a person has "two cognitions which are somehow discrepant with each other"' (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225, quoting from Brehm & Cohen 1962:3, 11).
- '[T]he crucial and necessary condition for the production of dissonance is that psychologically the two elements are inconsistent in the sense that the opposite of one follows from the other' (Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:428).

The assumption of the theory is that there is in individuals a tendency toward cognitive *consistency*. Inconsistency, or dissonance, therefore needs to be reduced – the greater the dissonance, the more pressure there is to reduce it (Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:430). Dissonance therefore becomes a *drive* (Sargent & Williamson 1966:225; cf also Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:430). Festinger himself formulated the following basic hypotheses for the theory:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and to achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase the dissonance.
3. The presence of dissonance gives rise to pressures to eliminate the dissonance. The strength of the pressures to reduce the dissonance is a function of the magnitude of the dissonance.

(Festinger 1957:18, quoted in Sargent & Williamson 1966:225)

Freedman, Sears and Carlsmith (1978:430) distinguish three major ways to reduce dissonance: first, by *reducing the importance* of the dissonant elements; second, by *adding consonant elements*; and third, by *changing* one of the dissonant elements so that it *becomes consistent* with the others.

A high level of dissonance is generated when a person puts a great amount of energy into a commitment or decision, and his expectations about its effects are disappointed (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:434). The dissonance aroused by *disconfirmed expectations* can be reduced in various ways (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:435), one of which is to confirm the correctness of the original belief, while conceding that the disconfirmed expectations were incorrect. This reaction was perceived by Festinger, Reicken and Schachter (1956) in their study of a group who predicted the end of the world, while they expected to be saved by a spaceship. Instead of giving up their belief and returning to normal life (which action would not have reduced the dissonance caused by all the energy expended in their planning), they decided that the day had been postponed, but the end of the world was coming soon. They also changed their style dramatically – instead of being reserved and avoiding publicity, they suddenly started recruiting new members. This gain in the number of members would presumably reduce their dissonance by showing that their original beliefs were correct, because more and more people were accepting them (cf Freedman, Sears & Carlsmith 1978:435).⁸

Gager (1975:20-40; cf also Gottwald 1982:145) employed the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain why an apocalyptic-prophetic group 'whose theory [myth] ceases to fit the observable facts' (Edwards 1983:434) may consequently cease to exist, but may also 'intensify its fervor and translate its energy into an expanded missionary movement' (Osiek 1984:41-42). Gager postulates both Jesus' crucifixion and the delay of the parousia as instances of 'disconfirmation', causing a sense of cognitive dissonance which resulted in 'the intellectual response of reassessment and reinterpretation..., and the social response of proselytism or mission activity...' (Osiek 1984:42; cf Scroggs 1980:173 for the conditions that are required if proselytizing is to occur following disconfirmation).

The most serious charge against Gager's *Kingdom and Community* (1975) is brought in by Smith (1978:123), and it concerns what he calls 'the imprecision of Gager's aims'. According to Smith (1978:123-124) this work's subtitle, *The social world of early Christianity*, consists of two parts, namely the phrases 'social world' and 'early Christianity'. The first of these signals theory and methodology (cf Smith 1975:21 for definitions of 'social world'), and the last is a matter of 'domain', that is the phenomenon that is being studied. Any social world in its concrete expression at basic level as a community must, according to Smith (1978:124), exist in some place at a certain time – it cannot remain in the abstract. Using the terms 'world-construction' and 'world-maintenance' as defined within the sociology of knowledge by Berger & Luckmann (1967), Gager displays a processual understanding of social world. Yet he fails to achieve concreteness, to arrive at that world he believes the

early Christians to be creating (Smith 1978:125). This fact gave rise to the title of Smith's review article: *Too much kingdom, too little community* – a play on Gager's own title (cf Smith 1978:123). Smith (1978:125) accuses Gager of adopting 'an all too easy functionalism' when being at all sociological, and claims that he is not really concerned with social construction, the analysis of symbolic worlds or asking social questions (Smith 1978:129). Smith's verdict (1978:124) on Gager's theoretical pretensions is: '...this book must be judged a noble failure....'

Other criticisms of Gager's approach are mainly directed at his assumption that early Christianity can be interpreted by reverting to comparisons with the millenarian movements (cf Best 1983:189), or that the continuing existence of Christianity, despite its beliefs and hopes and expectations being unfulfilled, can be explained by reference to the psychoanalytic phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. Malina, particularly, has taken up this issue, and is very critical of Gager: '...to employ a model from contemporary U.S. experience, such as Festinger's cognitive dissonance model, to directly explain something in the Mediterranean world, and the first century Mediterranean at that, seems highly suspect [I find this to be the case with nearly all of the explicit models used by Gager, 1975...]' (Malina 1986c:38; see also Malina 1982:240, and note 20 on the same page, for additional bibliographic references for a so-called 'balanced approach to the model'). Also, the theory of cognitive dissonance cannot adequately explain the *confirming* propensities of Jesus' resurrection (Osiek 1984:42-43; cf Tracy 1978:133). While Gager ascribes the survival of the early Christian groups to their overcoming their sense of cognitive dissonance, Malina (1986c:39) proposes exactly the opposite:

Rather than any attempt to solve the cognitive dissonance resulting from the disconfirmation of its belief system, I will argue that it was the dissonance itself along with the normative inconsistencies typical of early Christian movement groups that best accounts for the survival and growth of these groups...(I)n the social setting of earliest Christianity, normative inconsistency was the rule.

It is clear that Gager has fewer followers than critics on the issues discussed above. It is equally clear, though, that Gager's major work, *Kingdom and Community*, exhibits the same pioneering spirit that Elliott found laudable in Theissen (cf 2.5.1 above) and for that Gager, too, should receive credit.

2.5.3 Wayne A Meeks

Even before Theissen and Gager started writing in earnest on the subject of the social-scientific study of the New Testament, Meeks (1972) wrote an article – *The man from heaven in Johannine sectarianism* – in which he utilized concepts and theories from the sociology of knowledge to explain the reason for the creation of the motif of the Johannine descending/ascending redeemer. Meeks (1972:41) maintains that the Gospel of John was actually *intended* to be incomprehensible to outsiders, because it was meant to provide ‘a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group’s actual isolation from the larger society’ (Meeks 1972:70). It had its origin in the social context of the Johannine community. Berger (1977:230) criticized this notion of ‘insiders’, saying: ‘Die "outsiders" des JohEv und der einzige "insider", Jesus, sind in dieser Position nur literarisch gesehen.’ Still, even at that early stage Meeks had shown ‘the immense possibilities in this approach’ (Scroggs 1980:176).

Several years later, Meeks (1983) designated his major work on the subject of social aspects in the New Testament a *social description* or *social history* of Pauline Christianity (Meeks 1983:2; see also Gottwald 1982:144; Harris 1984:108). He defined his task in a double sense: ‘...to the limit that the sources and our abilities permit, we must try to discern the texture of life in particular times and particular places. After that, the task of the social historian of early Christianity is to describe the life of the ordinary Christian within that environment – not just the ideas or the self-understanding of the leaders and writers’ (Meeks 1983:2). The work seems to be more complex than a mere description, however, because Meeks (1983:2-7) has shown himself to be quite aware of the problems surrounding the interpretation of historical texts. In his words:

In writing social history, then, we cannot afford to ignore the theories that guide social scientists. But which of the competing schools of sociology or anthropology or social psychology shall we heed? At what level of our inquiry and on what scale are theoretical proposals useful? To what degree of overall coherence can we reasonably aspire, without endangering our appreciation of our object’s stubborn particularity? There is no comprehensive theory of social movements so commanding that we would be prudent to commit our method to its care. Even if there were, we should be suspicious of it. Christianity, even at the earliest moment we can get any clear picture of it, was already a complex movement

taking form within several complex societies. What social theory is adequate to grasp the whole?

(Meeks 1983:5)

Defining his approach as *interpretive description*, Meeks (1983:6) sketches his application of social science as 'eclectic', and his use of theory to be 'piecemeal, as needed, when it fits'. Having said this, Meeks (1983:6) nonetheless speaks about a 'family of perspectives shared by a growing number of social scientists and historians of religion' to which he also subscribes. According to this perspective 'society is viewed as a process, in which personal identity and social forms are mutually and continuously created by interactions that occur by means of symbols' (Meeks 1983:6). Meeks (1983:7) refers to his own position as that of a 'moderate functionalist' within this approach, and then again regards himself as 'adopting a functionalist perspective in this moderate form' (1983:7), by which he hopes to avoid being reductionistic (cf 2.5.1 above and especially 3.5.1 and 3.5.1.1 below for an explanation of 'functionalism').

In a comprehensive and detailed review of Meeks's *The first urban Christians*, Elliott (1985:333) expresses surprise at the fact that Meeks does not explicate his theoretical presuppositions, and states: 'Meeks, it would appear, would like to have it both ways – the safety of theory-free social description and the occasional dalliance with sociological research' (Elliott 1985:332). Again:

Meeks...is reluctant to explicate his sociological theory and models and to spell out more adequately the implications of his moderate functionalist perspective on the Pauline social world. Consequently, it is often unclear *how* his 'piecemeal theory' informs and shapes his conclusions and how these conclusions are to be evaluated. (Elliott 1985:334; see also Gottwald 1982:144; Tiryakian 1985:1139; Rohrbaugh 1987:110-113, 117-118 notes 24, 25, 27, 30)

Tiryakian (1985:1139) confesses to having an 'impression of conceptual fragmentation rather than of a unified piece' after reading Meeks's work. Schöllgen (1988) criticises Meeks on several points (not all of which are valid to my mind), the most important of which are: too little information to build valid conclusions on, and: transforming possibilities into certainties. Schöllgen (1988:75) formulates:

Der methodische Fehler von Meeks, der sich der Schwächen vieler seiner Einzelargumente durchaus be-

wusst ist, liegt in der Annahme, dass viele nur mögliche Interpretationen im Sinne einer Konvergenz-argumentation zusammengezogen die höheren Weihen der Wahrscheinlichkeit erhalten.

Whether Meeks intentionally sought to 'have it both ways' or not is unsure, but he seems to have succeeded where Theissen failed (cf 2.5.1 above), and that is to get a hearing with the more conservative theologians, if Kümmel (1985:359) can be regarded as their spokesman: '...im ganzen sind M.s Ausführungen überzeugend und weiterführend....'

On average, and despite the criticism, Meeks's work has been well received, described as 'the best single volume on the Pauline social world' (Elliott 1985:333) at the time and a 'balanced use of historical-critical and sociological-anthropological methods and theories' (Harris 1984:110).

2.5.4 Bruce J Malina

While, in the above discussion on Theissen (2.5.1), Gager (2.5.2) and Meeks (2.5.3), criticism has been voiced concerning the lack of explication of their theory and the models they use, the same could not be said about Malina. He has written extensively,⁹ and has always been at pains to explicate both theory and model. Malina has also done some invaluable work towards making the complex realm of social-scientific theory and models accessible to the interested reader by writing clearly and concisely on the subject (cf Malina 1982:229-242; 1983:119-133 for short introductions to his work; cf 1986a, especially pages 1-27, for a comprehensive explication and application of 'practical models for biblical interpretation').

An important observation by Malina on the use of models is the following:

...human beings generate models in order to understand their experiences. No model that we know of is useful for every conceivable purpose. There is no model to help understand all models, just as there is no language that one could learn to be able to understand all languages. The use of models is like the use of tools; in this sense models are question-specific or area-specific constructs. The appropriate model depends on the type of information one seeks to generate and comprehend.

(Malina 1982:237)

While this is true in general, it is also true of specific and controlled efforts to interpret human society or some aspect of it. A 'social system', according to Malina (1982:232), is actually a sort of model intrinsic to any human group. Its function is to provide 'categories of human experience and behavior that serve to help understand, control, and predict the flow of human interaction'. Therefore, any effort to understand or interpret human behaviour is based on some model of how the system works, and this is true whether it is acknowledged (explicit models) or not (implicit models) (cf Carney 1975:5; Malina 1982:232; Elliott 1986:6).

It is characteristic of the social sciences to use the models – whether sociological, anthropological, political, economic, educational, religious, cross-cultural or psychological (Malina 1982:232) – to examine human interaction in terms of what is typical and recurrent. This poses a problem when social systems are to be interpreted that are not available for observation, such as those of the early Christian groups. These groups are presented to us as part of the content of literary texts, whose main character is *not* simply descriptive, but ideological. In other words, the author would employ only such information (possibly of interest to the social sciences) as would be instrumental to his ideological point of view and purpose. In addition, the information would be in the guise of a way of expression peculiar to the author, and therefore incidental. This means that another set of models is needed besides those used to interpret the functioning of human social systems, and that would be models 'of the nature and function of language [linguistics]' (Malina 1982:232).

Another factor that has to be considered is the *historical issue*. The societies we wish to study are ancient, historical societies. They are not present to be observed and compared with other societies. They are contained in texts (units of meaning) from the past (cf Malina 1982:233). Because of the 'distance', in more than one sense, of those societies from our own, the meanings that prevailed in them would of necessity be alien to us. History, as a model for the interpretation of such alien meaning, 'seeks to explain events in terms of the distinctiveness of agents and agencies, in terms of particularities and differences. The other social sciences, rooted in the present, prescind from the past for the most part to seek out generalities, commonalities, samenesses' (Malina 1982:233). The problem is that 'in order to ferret out distinctiveness all the commonalities of the area under study have to be known and articulated' (Malina 1982:233). Therefore, models of the social science sort need to be combined with models of the history sort and models of the linguistic sort to interpret (biblical) texts from the past (Malina 1982:233).

Malina (1982:233) distinguishes 'three main types of social science models that one might use to understand social interaction', namely the structural functionalist model, the conflict model, and the symbolic model.¹⁰

The model (perspective) of *structural functionalism* presupposes that society is in equilibrium, and 'is a relatively persistent, stable, well-integrated structure of elements' (Malina 1982:234; see also Malina 1986c:40,43-44). According to this view, all the elements in society function towards the maintenance of society as a whole, integral system (Malina 1982:234): Adaptive change may occur over time, but non-adaptive change is regarded as deviance (cf Malina 1982:234). This model is useful for determining typical structures and patterns of behaviour within a society. Malina (1982:234 note 12) cites works by the following authors as examples of structural functionalist approaches to biblical texts: Gottwald (1979); Malina (1981a); Wilson (1980).

Another, and different, type of model (perspective) is that of *conflict theory*, also known as the *coercion, power or interest model* (Malina 1982:234; 1986c:42-44). This type of model presupposes that society and the elements of society are constantly changing, unless some force intervenes to prohibit the change. Malina (1982:235) states: 'From this perspective and in terms of this sort of model, a good way to understand biblical texts is to find out what elements or factors interfere with the normal process of change...Social change, deviance, is normal.' Gager's *Kingdom and community* (1975) is cited as an example of the application of the conflict model (Malina 1982:235 note 13).

The third main type of social science perspective focuses on the *symbolic* character of human interaction. Other than the structural functionalist and conflict models, the symbolic model does not presuppose 'that a social system is a group of interacting persons whose interactions are structured and oriented around common purposes' (Malina 1982:235). According to this approach a social system is regarded as a 'system of symbols, that is, meanings, values and feelings about the meanings and values that are attached to and embodied by persons, things, and events' (Malina 1982:235). The presupposition of this model is that individual and collective human behavior is organized around the symbolic meanings and expectations attached to objects that are socially valued (Malina 1982:236). Biblical interpreters could use this model to establish what roles, symbols, gestures, and definitions of situations are expressed or implied in the texts (cf Malina 1982:236). Some examples of the symbolic approach can be found in Feeley-Harnik (1981); Malina (1981b); Pilch (1981) (cf Malina 1982:236 note 14).¹¹ (For examples of how these different perspectives have been applied to the same text, see Malina 1988b; Pilch 1988; Neyrey 1988a).

Malina (1982:241; see also 1983:129-131) distinguishes five features that should characterize a good social science model for biblical interpretation:

Minimally, the model should have the following features: (1) it should be a cross-cultural model, accounting for the interpreter as well as those interpreted in some comparative perspective; (2) it should be of a sufficient level of abstraction to allow for the surfacing of similarities that facilitates comparison; (3) the model should be able to fit a larger sociolinguistic frame for interpreting texts; (4) it should derive from experiences that match what we know of the time and place conditioned biblical world as closely as possible; (5) the meanings it generates should be irrelevant but understandable to us and our twentieth century United States society; (6) the application of the model should be acceptable to social scientists (even if they disagree with the validity of the enterprise).

(Malina 1982:241)

Malina himself uses different interpretive models, although he is essentially committed to working from the perspective of cultural anthropology.¹² In the words of Neyrey (1986:107) Malina, in his recent major work (1986a), succeeded in developing 'a single macro-model for the investigation of the New Testament, viz., the cross-cultural model of British anthropologist Mary Douglas' (Neyrey 1986:107; for a discussion on the definition and application of anthropology, see Malina 1986b:150-151). An important benefit of the use of cross-cultural models is that it requires the interpreter to constantly take note of, and account for, his/her own social location, and so the use of such models should act as a deterrent for ethnocentric interpretation (Malina 1982:238-239; see Malina 1989 for a model of different time perceptions, and the importance of that for interpretation).

Ethnocentricity refers to the very common and universally found inclination of any individual or group to interpret the properties and/or behavior of any 'alien' individual and/or group in terms of the norms, values and characteristics of the own group. The concept 'ethnocentrism' was introduced by William G Sumner, and refers to a 'view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it' (Sumner 1940:13). The values of the own group, as the *in-group*, 'are equated with abstract, universal standards of morality and the practices of the in-group are exalted as better or more "natural"

than those of any out-group' (Noel 1971:33). Catton (1964:930) summarizes the essence of ethnocentrism as follows: 'Ethnocentrism makes us see out-group behavior as deviation from in-group mores rather than as adherence to outgroup mores.'

Deserving special mention is Malina's contribution in pointing out the distinction of four basic social institutions or structures in any society – namely kinship, economics, politics, and religion (Malina 1986b:152-153; see Gurvitch 1971:22-23 for a correlated notion from the sociology of knowledge).¹³ As a general rule, one of these institutions maintains primacy over the others in societal arrangements:

In Christendom in the past, and in Islamic republics in the present, kinship, economics, and politics are embedded in religion, i.e., the norms of kinship, economics, and politics are determined by the religious institution: representatives of the religious institution rule their societies in one way or another.

(Malina 1986b:153)

Malina (1986b:153-154) goes on to cite examples where either kinship, economics or politics maintained primacy and the other institutions were the embedded ones (cf also Hollenbach 1985:153). The importance of this contribution lies in the fact that it sensitizes the interpreter to the fact that the society being studied was configured radically different from ours. The interpreter should therefore take extreme care not to be ethnocentrically anachronistic.

2.5.5 John H Elliott

Elliott, even at a cursory reading, shows himself to have an excellent command of the theory and concepts of the social sciences, combining that with an informed way of perceiving and handling the texts. He is also the first of the authors under consideration¹⁴ to concentrate on the sociological interpretation of one single New Testament writing (Elliott 1981:7; see also Edwards 1983:442). In his major work, Elliott (1981:1) states the intention of his 'sociological exegesis' as being to complement and improve 'the prevailing method of biblical interpretation through more rigorous attention to the social dimension of the biblical text and to the sociological dimension of the exegetical task'. He defines 'sociological exegesis' as:

the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis (correlation) of (1) the literary, sociological and theological features and dimensions of the text (1 Peter) and (2) this text's

relation to and impact upon its narrower and wider social contexts.

(Elliott 1981:8)

Wire (1984:209) underscores Elliott's emphasis on the importance of the text: '...the text itself is the only witness to its specific situation...So it all comes back to literary analysis or what is more exactly called rhetorical analysis, searching the text for what Elliott calls the "strategy" of the writer, and through that finding the situation...in which this particular strategy makes sense.'

The term 'strategy' is of interest and of importance. Elliott (1981:10) defines the term as referring to the deliberate design of a document calculated to have a specific social effect on its intended hearers or readers (see also chapter 1, section 1.3.2.3 above). This has to do with the pragmatic dimension of the text, and includes aspects such as its goals, means, and intended function (Elliott 1987b:2). Evidence of the strategy of a text can be found in its manner of description, emphasis, and evaluation of certain selected features; the way in which it '*proscribes or criticises and/or prescribes or praises*' certain actions, roles, institutions, attitudes, beliefs, et cetera, or '*explains, justifies, and legitimates*' these (Elliott 1987b:2). The 'strategy' has to be related to the 'situation' of the text. *Situation*, according to Elliott (1987b:1; Elliott's emphasis):

...involves various levels and phases. The *macrosocial level of a text* concerns the macrosocial context of the text, the total social system in which the text is produced. The *microsocial level of a text* concerns the more specific social conditions and features of its specific sender(s) and receiver(s). The situation of a text can (be) viewed (a) *synchronically* (with attention to social patterns of behavior, institutions, structures, processes and their relations *at a given point or period in time*, or (b) *diachronically* (with attention to how these social features and arrangements *change over the course of time*).

This correlation between the *strategy* and the *situation* of a text in fact constitutes the integration of a literary and a social-scientific analysis of the text (cf sections 2.4, 2.4.5 and 2.4.6).

While a description of the strategy of a text is pursued by mainly *literary* methods, a description of the *situation* of a text is sought by mainly *social-scientific* methods. In an article on methods and models Elliott (1986:1-33) sketches a model of the process of making sense of things. A tree structure of this model would use

the term 'paradigm' to designate broad, inclusive ways of looking at realities (such as the historical-critical paradigm of biblical exegesis) and at a second level the term 'theoretical perspectives' to designate structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, et cetera (cf Elliott 1986:7). According to these 'theoretical perspectives' specific models are employed to investigate, organize and explain social data (cf Elliott 1986:8).

2.5.6 Norman R Petersen

Petersen is the second author under consideration who undertook a social-scientific investigation of a single New Testament document, namely Paul's Letter to Philemon (Petersen 1985). Petersen's approach in this work could be appropriately described as an integration of the salient elements of three key fields – two of them taken from the social sciences (sociology and anthropology) and the other from literary theory (narratology) – into 'the traditional philological base of the historical critical method' (Petersen 1985:ix; cf Hays 1987:173; Osiek 1987:39; Darr 1988:118, and Wimbush 1988:121 for positive assessments of Petersen's accomplishment of this goal). Petersen (1985:ix) himself calls it a 'literary sociological method'. The terms used to describe the three fields of interest are already suggestive of Petersen's methodology: *literary theory* refers to the concepts *point of view*, *narrative world* (as opposed to *contextual world*), *plot*, and *closure*, which are all associated with narrative analysis; *social anthropology* refers inter alia to the concepts *institution* and *social interaction*, which are associated with social scientific analysis; *sociology of knowledge* refers to the concept *symbolic universe*, which is associated with an analysis of belief systems.

Petersen (1985:171 note 2) remarks that the sociology of knowledge, as explicated by Berger & Luckmann (1967), provides the theoretical framework within which he reads the work of both field and armchair anthropologists. In an evaluation of the social-scientific side of Petersen's work the remark referred to should serve as a starting point, for it indicates that the sociology of knowledge provides the primary frame of reference according to which he assays the import of any data of social interest.¹⁵

2.5.6.1 Sociology of knowledge

Elsewhere (Van Staden 1988:340-345) I have made a condensed survey of the sociology of knowledge and its key concepts (as explicated by Berger & Luckmann 1967) while attesting to its usefulness for the interpretation of biblical texts (see Scroggs 1980:175; De Villiers 1984:66; Lategan 1984:10 for similarly positive evaluations). Petersen utilizes several of these concepts in the construction and application of his

model – concepts such as *role, resocialization, legitimation, universe-maintenance, social institutions, and symbolic universe.*

One of the major premises of the sociology of knowledge is that all thought is inextricably linked to its delineation by the contemporary historical situation and locality (Klaus Berger 1977:240). Therefore Berger & Luckmann (1967:4) see the central problem of the sociology of knowledge as establishing ‘the existential determination [Seinsgebundenheit] of thought as such’.¹⁶ According to Berger & Luckmann (1967:5) this is a general problem that arises when specific factors such as the historical, psychological, biological, economical or sociological, are seen as determinative of human thought. The postulate that social reality is created by man, and that man in turn is shaped by that reality, has led to the seemingly paradoxical statement of the sociology of knowledge that society is a product of man (Berger & Luckmann 1967:1, 3, 15), and man is a product of society (Berger 1973:13-14). This observation, that man and society reciprocally define one another, is of fundamental importance for the exegesis of New Testament texts – it redirects our attention to the fact that time is a capturing device, both for the historically ‘encapsulated’ society that we study through its literary products, and for the ‘encapsulated’ society into which we find ourselves absorbed. In essence this means that whilst the relationship between man and society has some universal traits, it also differs substantially between one time and place and others. Malina (1982:241) is no doubt correct when he states that the meanings generated by a social-scientific model for the ‘time and place’ conditioned biblical world should be irrelevant but understandable to us in twentieth-century society.

While we have explored Petersen’s approach towards the *literature* of the New Testament separately (2.4.6 above), it is immediately clear from a reading of his work (1985) that the *social-scientific* part of his interpretive model is based on his literary insight. In a discussion and evaluation of the social-scientific elements of his approach the key literary elements would therefore have to be referred to again.

Probably the most important one of these literary elements for Petersen, is the concept of the *referential history*, or the *narrative world* of a narrative discourse (see 2.4 above). Petersen, following Eco (1979), understands the concept to refer to the world as it is represented in the text, and that world represents the referential function of messages as explicated by Roman Jakobson (Petersen 1985:33 note 3; 1978: 9-48). Defining the concept, Petersen (1985:33 note 3) states: ‘[T]he world of a narrative is a literary construction, and the events which take place in that world have a narrative quality.’ Elsewhere he formulates as follows: ‘The narrative world is that reality which a narrator bestows upon his actors and upon their actions...’ (Petersen 1985:7). This literary-theoretical statement provides the link between the literary

and social-scientific endeavours. According to Petersen (1985:ix), "worlds" are human constructions, whether they are the constructions of societies or of narrators, and...narrative worlds are comprised of the same kinds of social facts – symbolic forms and social arrangements – as so-called real worlds'. In this way the literary concept of *narrative worlds* becomes accessible to social science analysis.

The link-up in Petersen's approach, between the literary concept of the narrative world as a *constructed world*, and the sociology of knowledge's presentation of social reality as a *constructed reality*, seems almost inevitable. Petersen (1985:17-22, especially 20-21) argues consistently from the premise that narrative worlds and social reality are somehow akin in terms of construction and operation. Both these kinds of 'worlds' are analyzed in terms of two social-scientific categories, namely *social arrangement* and *symbolic form*, which constitute what are known as *social facts* (see Petersen 1985:38 note 49; 40 note 66 for a brief discussion, and bibliographical references, on the subject of social facts). Petersen (1985:x) gives the following definitions of these two categories:¹⁷

'Social arrangements' have to do with the social structures underlying the social relations comprised by the actions of the actors...'Symbolic forms', on the other hand, have to do with the overarching cognitive systems, the systems of knowledge, belief, and value, that define these actors' identities and motivate their actions.

Social arrangements, therefore, have to do with the social institutions one encounters in everyday life, institutions within the fields of economics, politics, family, religion and kinship. It has to do with the social relations enacted by the actors who represent these institutions. All these elements make up the fabric of what is known as the *social universe* (Petersen 1985:27-28) or *institutional order*. This order, however, is a segmented one, precisely by virtue of its institutionality. The discrete institutional processes need to be integrated into a comprehensive meaningful system. This is done by the *symbolic universe*, which is an all-embracing frame of reference that provides an integrative meaning for a society that consists of segmented institutions and diverse subjective experiences (cf Van Staden 1988:349, summarizing Berger & Luckmann). Petersen (1985:57) defines a symbolic universe as a body of traditional knowledge known through language and symbol, a system of meanings that defines and thereby creates a 'world'. It shapes and legitimates social institutions (cf Darr 1988:120). The *social universe*, according to Petersen (1985:27-28), is inhabited by both believers and non-believers, while God and Christ are absent from the social universe but present in the symbolic universe. They are present in the social

universe only as objects of knowledge. Therefore Petersen makes a distinction between *theology* and *symbolic universe* as representing two different kinds of knowledge. He states:

Theology...is...a kind of knowledge that is the product of systematic reflection upon a symbolic universe, and indeed of reflection that serves to maintain that universe when it is in some kind of jeopardy, as for example from the threats of doubt, of disagreement, or of competing symbolic universes. Theology is...a kind of knowledge that is produced to defend and maintain the knowledge comprising a symbolic universe, and for this reason we can speak of a symbolic universe as a primary (pre-reflective) form of knowledge and theology as a secondary (reflective) form that is dependent on it.

(Petersen 1985:29-30)

According to Hays (1987:173) the second chapter of Petersen's *Rediscovering Paul*, which scrutinizes the social structures and arrangements depicted in the narrative world, is 'the real heart of Petersen's work', offering the greatest advances in our understanding of Paul.

However, Hays (1987:174) is critical of Petersen's distinction between 'symbolic universe' and 'theology'. He describes Petersen's survey of Paul's symbolic universe as 'looking very much like a summary of Pauline theology under the unifying themes of kinship and master-slave relations'. He is also doubtful whether the social-anthropological categories allow Petersen to adequately display the *narrative* structure of Paul's 'symbolic universe'.

2.5.6.2 Using social anthropology

To study these institutions and the social relations as presented in the narrative, Petersen employs the discipline of *social anthropology*, a subfield of the social science 'anthropology'. He consciously chooses to use social anthropology, because it accomplishes what sociology cannot – namely it accounts for the category of *symbolic forms* and its relation to *social arrangements* (cf Petersen 1985:18).

The relationship between the worlds explored by anthropologists and the narrative worlds consists mainly in both being 'closed systems' (see Petersen 1985:40 note 61 and 63, for bibliographic references on this subject). This means that 'when and as such worlds are experienced, they comprise an internally ordered whole which is the ultimate object of interest, for it is the frame of reference in which the parts

make sense' (Petersen 1985:20). The reader of a narrative and the anthropologist are also alike inasmuch as they are both 'participant observers in other worlds' (Petersen 1985:20).

According to the exposition by Petersen the three fields, namely narrative criticism, sociology of knowledge, and social anthropology, are compatible enough for them to be incorporated into a model with which to study the narrative world of a New Testament narrative discourse. The primary factor promoting compatibility is the fact (cf 2.5.6.1 above) that all three of these fields apply to the study of 'worlds' – narrative worlds, social worlds and symbolic universes. Another link between the literary and social aspects of Petersen's work was noted by Darr (1988:120): 'Conspicuously absent from the field of view afforded by Petersen's literary lens is the element of characterization. This is hardly coincidental, for it is precisely at this point that the literary and the social are merged...That is, he treats the characters of Paul's story solely in sociological terms.'

Finally, the *sociology of knowledge* has a relative independence within the discipline of sociology in the sense of formulating its own epistemology for the purpose of providing an explanation for the coming about and persistence of everyday social reality. At the same time, the sociology of knowledge's understanding of social reality, as advocated by Berger & Luckmann, to my mind bears a close resemblance to *structural functionalism*, one of the main perspectives on the functioning of society distinguished within the social sciences (cf Turner 1982:19-116; see sections 2.5.1 and 2.5.4 above, 3.5.1 and 3.5.1.1 below).

2.6 Concluding comments

This survey of recent scholarship was intended to be more descriptive than evaluative, although some evaluation is unavoidable and perhaps desirable. Several articles exist which provide readers with an introduction to the social-scientific approach towards the New Testament (e.g. Scroggs 1980; Malina 1982, 1983; Best 1983; Osiek 1984; Elliott 1986; Botha 1989; Joubert 1991). The purpose of this survey was to determine the specific literary approach of the exponents under consideration, and secondly to determine the nature and content of their social-scientific approach. What remains now is to table and discuss the most important factors gleaned from the above discussions that have a direct bearing on our present interests.

Broadly speaking, there are three major conclusions to be drawn:

- A definite distinction should be maintained between approaches concentrating on constructing a *social history* from and for the text, and approaches

that wish to analyse the text by means of the methods and models developed in the *social sciences* (cf 2.3.1 above).

- Both in the case of *descriptive* studies (or studies with the purpose of constructing a *social history* of early Christianity) and in the case of explanatory or interpretive studies constituting a *social-scientific* analysis of the social forces and institutions of early Christianity (cf Elliott 1981:6-7), one should be especially aware of the danger of the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. This fallacy refers to the illegitimate application of the presumed meaning of a term or syntactical unit in antiquity to present-day problems. A case in point relating to a descriptive study is Stegemann's explication of the meaning of the term 'poor' in the New Testament and, based on that explication, his solution for treating the present-day poor (Stegemann 1984:54-64, 72-73 notes 68-77; see also 1.2.5.1 above). It is also possible that even interpretive social scientific studies could reflect the same fallacy, inasmuch as they make no distinction between the *narrative world* and the *contextual world* of a text, or between the *situation* and the *strategy* of a text (2.4.6 and 2.4.5 above, respectively).
- Finally, it has become clear that scholars in this field allocate differing levels of importance to the composition of the narrative text. In the case of Theissen it seems that meanings conferred on the material by a creative author were completely ignored. Meeks and Malina made more of the text, but it was Elliott and Petersen who proposed that the text should be treated in literary as well as in social-scientific terms. This is in agreement with my own assessment of the import of both these directional approaches. Therefore the salient elements of literary criticism and the social sciences will feature prominently in this study.

2.7 Endnotes: Chapter 2

1. Only a few South African scholars – such as De Villiers (1984), Joubert (1987; 1990), Domeris (1988), and Botha (1989) – have worked on the subject of the social-scientific study of the New Testament. Most of these works are general surveys of the field of study.
2. It can be, and is being, accessed in that way, but I would regard this as methodologically fallacious.
3. According to Theissen the concept ‘structural homologue’ designates a structural correspondence between different entities or phenomena, and by the correspondence a connection is established (Theissen 1978:26).
4. Elliott (1981:19, note 22), quoting Burke (1967:ix), states that ‘critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose’. I am in agreement with this perspective, but would like to add that such works could also be *questions* levelled at the status quo.
5. This is also reflected by the subtitle of his work: *The shadow of the Galilean*. The subtitle reads: *The quest of the historical Jesus in narrative form*.
6. One of the criticisms of the functionalist perspective is precisely that it reflects a conservative bias (cf Cohen 1968:58).
7. Papineau (1978:168) uses the concept *attitudinal consistency* to describe the same phenomenon as is described by *cognitive dissonance*, even citing the same example. According to Papineau (1978:169) attitudinal inconsistency is experienced when two or more potentially conflicting desires are involved. The need to *reduce* attitudinal inconsistency and obtain *consistency* leads to the adoption of certain beliefs. Papineau regards such beliefs that serve to reduce inconsistency as *ideological*: ‘The common notion of an “ideological” belief would...be of a belief which is promulgated in order to defend actions or policies which are in the interest of a certain group, by presenting those actions or policies as having results which are accepted as being in the general good’ (Papineau 1978:169).

8. For a concise and informative discussion of all aspects of the cognitive dissonance theory, see Freedman, Sears and Carlsmith (1978:426-461). For reservations on the experiments and findings based on the theory, see Rosenberg (1965).
9. See the list of some of his work in *Works Consulted*.
10. Elliott (1986:7; see also note 13 on the same page) prefers to designate these and other styles of theorizing as 'theoretical perspectives' rather than 'models'.
11. For a discussion of the 'three criticisms leveled against the use of social science models in biblical interpretation', see Malina 1982:237-238.
12. Cultural anthropology, according to Gottwald (1982:145), is 'essentially structural-functional in character'. Gottwald (1982:155 note 14) cites Malina (1981b) as an example of a structural-functionalist approach. Malina himself, however, cites the same work as an example of the symbolic approach (1982:236 note 14).
13. I found a correlate for this notion of Malina in a discussion by Gurvitch (1971:22-23) on types and forms of knowledge. Gurvitch made the following important observation:

Certain types of knowledge, most particularly the perceptual knowledge of the external world, but also knowledge of the Other and the We, groups, classes, etc., political knowledge, certain branches of scientific knowledge arising from the natural sciences (astronomy, physics, biology, etc.) or human sciences (including history and sociology), involve the study of the specific space and time in which their objects move.

Gurvitch (1971:23) goes on to say that the different types of knowledge range themselves in an *hierarchic* system as soon as it comes to social frameworks of major importance. And then, more importantly, '*...in this variable hierarchy the predominant type or types penetrate all the others*'. He gives the following example: 'In Ancient Greece, philosophical knowledge and perceptual knowledge of the external world, which held first place, penetrated all the other types of knowledge....' From these references it is clear that Malina's exposition on

basic social institutions is not a novel idea – it had its antecedents in sociology of knowledge's reflections on *different types of knowledge* belonging to the *different frameworks of knowledge* within a *specific time and place*.

I might add one more important observation by Gurvitch (1971:23 note 1) to this note: 'Sometimes a tendency towards isolation of types of knowledge is produced as a function of the intensity of the "We" as it asserts itself as an esoteric communion, and when particular groupings show a propensity towards becoming closed collective units.' See Gurvitch (1971:26-27; 48-64) respectively on 'We'-knowledge, and on masses, communities, communions and particular groups as social frameworks of knowledge.

14. According to Elliott (1989a) Fernando Belo (1975) was the first scholar to perform a social-scientific analysis of a single New Testament work, namely the Gospel of Mark.
15. The methodological question might be asked whether compromising oneself in this measure might not influence both one's perception and interpretation of the data. This is especially true when the sociology of knowledge, which is in essence a philosophical-phenomenological hermeneutic approach to social reality, becomes the filter through which a related but different social science, anthropology, is evaluated.
16. Other definitions that describe the general significance of the sociology of knowledge are the following, taken from Gould & Kolb's (1964:679), *A dictionary of the social sciences* (1964:679):
 - 'The proper theme of our study is to observe how and in what form intellectual life at a given historical moment is related to the existing social and political forces' (Mannheim 1952:237-260).
 - 'Sociology of knowledge is the analysis of the functional interrelations of social processes and structures on the one hand and the patterns of intellectual life, including the modes of knowing, on the other' (Becker & Dahlke 1941:310).
 - 'The sociology of knowledge...is concerned with the way in which systems of thought...are conditioned by other social facts' (Spratt 1954:141).
17. Petersen (1985:39 note 49) acknowledges his indebtedness to the work of Berger & Luckmann (1967) for the use of these categories.