CHAPTER TWO
MODELS AND QUESTIONS

2.1 The ‘Sect’, A Concept with Changing Meanings

‘Sect’ may be used to refer to a group in a simple sense (S. Cohen 1987; Schiﬀman 1995). In so doing, scholars follow the modern derivations of the notions φιλοσοφία and ἀἵρεσις, originally referring to an ancient Greek or Roman (philosophical) school with teacher and students, or to a group generally, words often translated as ‘sect’ in English translations of the writings of Josephus, Philo and the NT.¹

However, the modern sociological meaning of the word ‘sect’ has, as stated above, been much more speciﬁc and substantial, referring to some kind of a deviant, separatist or segregated group, often with negative connotations. The traditional ‘sect’ typology in sociology has also been steadily altered and accustomed to new empirical insights since its early start by M. Weber and Troeltsch (see e.g. Pope 1942:117ﬀ; O’Dea 1966:66ﬀ; Johnson 1971:124). When presenting the typology in the previous chapter, I concluded that the main reason for the negative judgement by several biblical scholars was the fact that Troeltsch and H. Niebuhr developed the ‘sect’ type in correlation to a ‘church’-type, which means that without a Christian ‘church’, there is no ‘sect’. Applying it to a pre-Christian scene seems to be sheer nonsense. However, it is far from correct to say that

¹ Josephus used the notion ἀἵρεσις to present different directions among ‘Jews’, linking its meaning to the verb ἀἱρέομαι (‘choose for oneself’) and without any connotation to further social characteristics of the notion. Thackeray’s (1926) edition of Josephus translates the word with ‘sect’ in Vita 10, while he uses ‘school’ in Bell. 2:162. In the Latin translation by Haverkamp and Hudson (Josephus 1782–1785), ‘secta’ is used to denote both φιλοσοφία and ἀἵρεσις within the same passage. In Philo’s Contempl. 29, the notion ἀἵρεσις is used about the Egyptian (Jewish) Therapeutae and translated with ‘sect’ by Yonge (1993:700) and ‘secte’ in the French edition by Daumas and Miquel (1963:99). In English translations of the NT, ‘sect’ is a common translation of ἀἵρεσις in Acts, see NRSV (1993) of Acts 15:5; 24:5, 14; 26:5; 28:22. On the connection between Josephus; modern translation and the meaning of the notion, see also Barrett (1989); J. T. Sanders (1993:124).
sociologists only have defined ‘sect’ in relation to the ‘church’. In Marxist sociology, the ‘sectarian’ protest is explained as a result of an ongoing class struggle in societies within which the class conflict is not yet conscious. Non-Marxists may argue in a similar vein that the origin of ‘sects’ leads ‘not into the arena of class struggle, but towards other causes of social division and human disaffection’ (W. Stark 1967:6).

M. Weber, in his quest for the ideal ‘sect’ type, was in fact aware of the anachronistic fallacy and used the concept in a broad way. Thus, he regarded the groups of Pharisees and Essenes as proofs of a social exclusiveness typical in any ‘sect’ and pointed to similar features among the followers of Jesus. He also speaks of Muslim ‘sects’ (M. Weber 1993:265). Nevertheless, the term has been particularly attached to the development of the later Christian church. Admittedly, it is difficult to use a term so attached to the later development of the Christian church on the period of its formation. At the same time, sociologists of religion have also argued that the model is now out of date for a description of the many new religious groups that are emerging today, and claim that its wide range of meanings is too confusing for their purpose (Garrett 1992:181; Bainbridge 1997:24). Sociologists who apply it are scholars like Wilson (1990) and R. Stark and Bainbridge (1985). One who has come to abjure the notion, is M. Douglas (1996) where she argues that the term has now become ‘a term of reproach or even of contempt applied by members of the Church to dissenters’ and therefore ‘should be ruled out of the discourse’ (1996:xix). The negative connotation that the notion ‘sect’ carries is generally recognised.² Some more glimpses of the history of the model may help to evaluate its usefulness to biblical interpretation.

Troeltsch followed the tradition of M. Weber applying the typology to later historical periods and in 1911 defined a ‘sect’ as a religious protest against established religion and against secular society. The ‘church’ on the other hand, tends to adjust to the larger secular society, he argued.³ In 1929, H. Niebuhr adopted the theory on

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³ See Troeltsch (1981); H. Niebuhr (1957). Troeltsch’s article ‘The Social Teaching