SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES AND JESUS RESEARCH

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1. Introduction

The meanings people share in their interpersonal communication derive from their social systems. This is a universal human phenomenon. If ancient authors communicated meanings to their audiences, the only way to understand what those audiences understood is to understand their social systems. To understand what the ancient sources dealing with Jesus meant, one must obviously have recourse to the social system(s) of that time. Otherwise readings of the sources will necessarily be anachronistic and ethnocentric. Social-science approaches to Jesus research have been developed to avoid those pitfalls. These approaches employ a collection of appropriate generalizations and models from the social sciences to interpret the sources for the study of Jesus of Nazareth. What makes a social-scientific generalization or model appropriate depends upon social-scientific and historical judgment. The social-scientific judgment of appropriateness relates to whether the behaviors in question conform to the social system of the eastern Mediterranean cultural region, with its traditional values (e.g. gender roles, concern for honor) and social structures (e.g. kinship focus, endogamous marriage). The historical judgment of appropriateness relates

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3 On the Mediterranean as a culture area, see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). To
to whether the generalizations and models can be shown to trace back to the first-century eastern Mediterranean. To make such a historical judgment, the historian must remove the filters rooted in the historical developments called Technologism and Scientism, Romanticism (or Postmodernism), the Industrial Revolution, Sense of History, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and Reformation, the Scientific Method, Scholasticism, Islam, Christendom, Jewishness (rabbinic and Talmudic), Augustine, Constantine, Origen and the like. Each of these historical episodes introduced social features that obfuscate an understanding of the first-century eastern Mediterranean.

The requisite historic awareness of social features that have emerged over the past two millennia indicates that social-scientific approaches to Jesus research are always a form of historical study. However unlike most historians, those using social-scientific approaches explicitly state which generalizations and models they use and why. They explicitly define the terms used in their generalizations and models and then describe the models that undergird the generalizations. In other words, those using social-scientific approaches study the available sources with specific historical questions in mind, with a view to locating the information generated by those questions within some historically and cul-

study comparative culture areas, see the Human Relations Area File (begun by George P. Murdock, now on CD) in which every society on the planet is described in terms of its institutions, values and notable behavioral features. The fruit of such a collection has been to understand other people on their own terms through comparative generalizations. The outcome has been the awareness of culture-areas, areas in which various people hold similar cultural values and modes of perception and assessment of life experiences. Murdock, for example, produced a small book called Theories of Illness: A World Survey (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1980) in which he took 186 societies and compared them in terms of similarities and differences relative to sickening. Thanks to his categorizations, he surfaced the main theories of illness common to various groupings of these various societies. I mention this book because one of Murdock’s unexpected conclusions was to discover a theory of illness characteristic of and distinctive to the circum-Mediterranean region, regardless of the particular histories of the distinctive ethnic or national groups: “Trial and error showed, however, that if North Africa were detached from sub-Saharan Africa and the Near East from Asia, and if both were grouped with Europe to form a composite Circum-Mediterranean region, this would yield three regions reasonably comparable not only to one another but also to each American continent and the Insular Pacific. The experimental tabulation of the incidence of the major theories of illness in these ad hoc regions led to a serendipitous discovery: The theories actually showed some tendency toward segregation by region” (42). Illness theories are replications of the interpretive themes of a culture, and common illness theories would point to common interpretive themes. Thus as regards illness perception, the Mediterranean is different, a difference Murdock traces back to antiquity.