Saul M. Olyan (ed.)

*Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect.*

This compilation of ten essays edited by Saul Olyan presents some of the finest modern biblical scholars applying social theory to problems in the biblical field. The scholarship of Weber, Marx, Bourdieu, Foucault, the Lenskis, and especially Mary Douglas is used to examine issues such as cult centralization, prophecy, cross cultural comparisons, and violence to illuminate these issues from a fresh perspective. Essays include Robert R. Wilson’s “Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: A Retrospective on the Past Forty Years of Research,” Susan Ackerman’s “Cult Centralization, the Erosion of Kin-Based Communities, and the Implications for Women’s Religious Practices,” Stephen L. Cook’s “The Levites and Sociocultural Change in Ancient Judah: Insights from Gerhard Lenski’s Social Theory,” Ronald Hendel’s “Away from Ritual: The Prophetic Critique,” T. M. Lemos’ “‘They Have Become Women’: Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration,” Nathaniel B. Levtow’s “Text Production and Destruction in Ancient Israel: Ritual and Political Dimensions,” Carol Meyers’ “The Function of Feasts: An Anthropological Perspective on Israelite Religious Festivals,” Saul M. Olyan’s “Theorizing Violence in Biblical Ritual Contexts: The Case of Mourning Rites,” Rüdiger Schmitt’s “Theories Regarding Witchcraft Accusations and the Hebrew Bible,” and David P. Wright’s “Ritual Theory, Ritual Texts, and the Priestly-Holiness Writing of the Pentateuch.” This book does not represent an unstinting optimism about the power of social theory, as cautious notes are sounded several times in these essays. The book does show the importance of social theory for offering powerful new ways to understand the Hebrew Bible.

The book starts with a helpful retrospective essay by Robert Wilson that lays out both the scope of social theory in biblical studies and the evolution of it. He sees sociology and anthropology as having the greatest influence on the study of Israel’s religion. Weber’s work is distinguished by sociology’s focus on regularities and overall patterns. Marx argues for economic and social forces rather than ideological (i.e. religious) ones. The development of social anthropology led to the conception of society in biblical terms and to the development of powerful ethnographies that could be mined by biblical scholars seeking analogies with other societies. The second wave of sociological approaches to biblical religion starting in 1980 resulted in a new anthropological line of research, sociological synthesis, and a focus on women and gender.

Space does not allow me to review all the essays, so I would like to focus on essays by Hendel, Meyers, and Olyan that I found particularly instructive.
Hendel’s struck me as the most provocative and challenging in the volume. Hendel uses the theories of Mary Douglas to understand Amos’ discourse on antiritualism. He also uses Bourdieu’s idea of doxa, the unquestioned assumptions and practices of society that are not subject to dispute, to argue that the classical prophets questioned the doxa. Only one who feels coolly toward society as the classical prophets did can question its doxa. Using Douglas’ terms, Hendel sees the prophets’ behavior as independent of habitual norms, and their social relations as low grid (lax rules of behavior) and low group (porous group boundaries). Nineteenth-century scholars who were often explicitly anti-Semitic heaped praise on these classical prophets. While these positions rooted in anti-Semitism have been eschewed after the horrors of World War II, Hendel believes the focus on the heart and the complete rejection of ritual are true to Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. The texts mean exactly what they say. Hendel’s use of Douglas and Bourdieu is excellent, and the appeal not to domesticate prophetic speech for ecumenical ears is important, but some tension remains about how “utopian” and “antiritual” the prophets were. In his initial discussion of Amos 5:21–24, Hendel states: “[T]he poem is not a blanket rejection of ritual as such, but a rejection of the practices of the interpellated ‘you’” (62).

Meyers uses the social sciences to explicate shared meals in her essay. Both Meyers and Ackerman broadly examine the role of shared meals and cult centralization with slightly different foci and results. Both see cult centralization as unable to reduce the role of women, although it did erode kin-based religious society. Ackerman finds a negligible role for women in sacrificial meals even before cult centralization, but Meyers sees women’s roles as more extensive in shared meals. Meyers also uses archaeology and ethnographic feasting studies to point to the emotional intensity of feasting with its slaughter of animals, common eating, and dancing. Meyers’ use of social theory struck me as exemplary. In a related essay, Cook uses Lenski’s theories to help us understand growing stratification in advanced agrarian societies.

Saul Olyan applies recent work by social anthropologists to understand “violence as a rational and meaningful rather than an irrational and meaningless form of behavior” (170–71). His primary interest is in the role of violence in ritual settings. While the legitimacy of violence can be contested, Olyan notes other disciplines such as sociobiology see violence as innate and downplay the sociocultural dimension in which Olyan is so interested. He uses four texts (2 Sam. 10:1–5; 16:5–13; Neh. 13:25; and Isa. 50:4–11) to argue that violence in mourning and ritual contexts is deployed to shame the victim and reshape the political landscape. His essay deploys social theory to give us deeper insights