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A KALEIDOSCOPE OF APPROACHES: PARADIGMS, PARADIGM-CHANGES AND THE UMWELT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT
The question which requires our attention in this article is whether the renaissance of the social scientific approach to the New Testament does in fact represent a paradigm change from the historico-critical angle of incidence to the study of the lifeworlds of these texts. In this regard Thomas Kuhn's well-known thesis concerning the development of science in terms of scientific revolutions is used to evaluate the present state of affairs in studies on the Umwelt of the New Testament. His theory provides a powerful speculative instrument with which to determine whether Biblical scholars who make use of social scientific models do in fact open up new systems of knowledge, and in the process contribute to an adjustment in our understanding of these ancient texts.

1 INTRODUCTION
Never before have scholars written so much on the lifeworld of the New Testament as in the last decade or two. But even the most superficial overview of the available publications on the political, religious, economic and social background(s) of the New Testament reveals that the majority of them more or less follow the same layout, and cover the same topics. They also advance from the same kind of presuppositions and use the same kind of 'tools' to describe the Umwelt of the New Testament and its influence on the early Christian communities and their production of texts. Seminal publications by scholars such as Emil Schürer and Adolf Deissmann played a decisive role in this regard. Their works, including the presuppositions, theories and analytical 'tools' they used, soon attracted a large (and enduring) group of adherents. Schürer and Deissmann thus provided the foundation, and a conceptual model, from which a coherent tradition of scientific research developed, and which is currently still an important subdiscipline within the historico-critical paradigm.

In the 1970s publications by scholars such as John Gager, Wayne Meeks and Gerd Theissen introduced the renaissance of the so-called sociological, or as it is more commonly known today, the social-scientific approach to the New Testament. Due to, amongst others, the presence of certain anomalies within the historico-critical paradigm, as well as deficiencies with regard to its problem-
solving abilities, the scholars mentioned above, and many others, set out to (re)interpret the social world of the New Testament with the help of modern social scientific models.

The question with which I shall occupy myself in this article is whether the revival of the social scientific approach to the New Testament does in fact present a paradigm change from the historico-critical angle of incidence to the study of these texts' lifeworlds. In order to provide an answer to this question, I must obviously not only ascertain what the status and objectives of zeitgeschichtliche studies within the historico-critical paradigm are, but also determine how, and, if at all, to what extent the analytical methods and objectives of the social-scientific approach differ from the paradigm mentioned above. Does the social-scientific approach in other words present a new, different, basic pattern of analysing the New Testament and its world? But first of all the meaning of the term paradigm must be determined.

2 PARADIGMS, PARADIGM CHANGES AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

The term ‘paradigm’ is synonymous with the American historian of science and physicist, Thomas Kuhn. In his epoch-making study: *The structure of scientific revolutions*, he argued that progress in science does not take place in a cumulative manner via the acquisition of knowledge hidden in scientific textbooks. Science is rather a series of peaceful interludes interrupted by shockwaves (‘revolutions’) where one vision, one conceptual scientific world view, is dramatically replaced by another. Kuhn uses the celebrated, but also ambiguous term paradigm to typify this development of science. According to him, this term, in the first place, refers to the entire constellation of beliefs and techniques shared by the members of a particular scientific community. But, secondly, it also denotes an element in this constellation, namely ‘the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science’ (Kuhn 1970:175). In this sense a particular paradigm (as a disciplinary matrix) then provides the methodological and conceptual apparatus for scientific communities to formulate theories in order to solve the problems which they investigate. At the same time paradigms also provide the criteria for identifying problems that can be assumed to have solutions (1970:37).

Scholars who share the same basic paradigm also use the same concepts to explain problems, and they agree about standards of solutions for these problems. In other words: the ways in which problems are solved are certain. Kuhn refers to this phase of scientific research within the framework of an accepted paradigm as the period of ‘normal science’ (1970:23-42). Normal science is therefore a group-based activity. The aim of normal scientific research is not so much to invent new theories, but rather to articulate the phenomena and theories
supplied by the dominant paradigm, and to solve the remaining puzzles which still confront the scientific community. Much time is therefore spent by scientists in efforts to refine and sanction their respective paradigms, and defend them against competing paradigms.

Normal science sometimes runs into trouble. When more and more puzzles cannot be effectively solved within the 'boundaries' of a particular paradigm, a crisis develops amongst scientists. In response they will normally devise 'numerous articulations and ad hoc modifications of their theories in order to eliminate any apparent conflict' (1970:78). However, when an individual, or a group of persons within the scientific community eventually conclude that the existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the solving of problems, they will address this dilemma by inaugurating a scientific revolution, which in turn, often results in the formation of a new paradigm (1970:92). A scientific revolution, as a conceptual transformation, not only drastically changes the historical perspective of the individual or group, but also leads to the overthrow of previously accepted theories, the identification of new problems, the construction and use of new models and analytical tools to solve them, as well as a total reinterpretation of existing systems of knowledge. In short: it leads to a new scientific world view where scientists' perceptions of phenomena are completely altered. Revolutions of this kind are not the result of cumulative developments, or a gradual replacement of old paradigms by new ones, but rather Gestalt-switches, or as Kuhn calls it 'flashes of intuition, lightning flashes, where one paradigm is replaced in a creative leap by another one which holds out a new promise for success in the solving of problems' (1970:122). The eventual choice of a new paradigm is therefore not always the result of rational decisions; it is a complex procedure in which historical, psychological and social factors all play an important role.

Kuhn's work immediately gave rise to a lively debate among scientists. Biblical scholars also discovered the possibilities that Kuhn's views hold out for understanding and explaining the conceptual frameworks of the different, and often competing, theological models. A number of influential publications that focussed on the role of paradigms in theology thus saw the light in the 1980s (cf Goulder 1985; Martin 1987; Vorster 1988). Important developments within the field of theological research have also contributed to this interest in Kuhn's views. New Testament studies in particular have undergone drastic changes in the past decades due to the fact that an ever growing group of scholars took cognisance of developments in other scientific disciplines such as literary criticism, the social sciences and philosophy. It therefore comes as no surprise that 'shifts' in the broader philosophical and epistemological contexts of these disciplines are nowadays also reflected in New Testament studies.

In order then to evaluate the present state of affairs in studies on the Umwelt
of the New Testament, Kuhn’s model will be used in this paper as a framework to analyse the changes in the conceptualization of, and the explanations offered for, some of the problems which confront scholars. In spite of some valid points of criticism levelled against Kuhn’s views, which will be addressed in the course of the paper, and in spite of the exaggerated use of his theories by some theologians who tend to label every new whim a paradigm shift, it provides a powerful speculative instrument with which to determine

1 whether New Testament scholars use new theories merely to supply new labels to the same old problems, or whether they do in fact open up new systems of knowledge, and in the process contribute to an adjustment or a change in our understanding of these texts;

2 whether any so-called ‘new approach’ does in fact reflect a new methodology and epistemology, as well as a new set of values shared by the scientific community in question.

3 HISTORICO-CRITICAL STUDIES ON THE BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

3.1 The historico-critical paradigm
Hans Künig (1989:214), in his evaluation of Thomas Kuhn, clarifies his use of the term paradigm by in fact distinguishing three types of paradigms, namely, macro-paradigms as fundamental models characteristic of whole epochs, meso-paradigms which relate to the solution of problems in the intermediate field, and micro-paradigms which relate to the solving of individual, detailed problems with which the various scientific communities have to deal. The historico-critical approach, according to Kung’s distinction, undoubtedly then qualifies as a macro-paradigm.

This paradigm developed during the Aufklärung. The Aufklärung, with its liberating effect on all levels of humankind’s existence, led to a new concept of history. In the words of Lategan (1979:19-20), ‘No longer was history understood as the result of superhuman forces over which man had no control, or the expression of timeless ideas.’ Under influence of rationalists like David Hume who represents the convictions of the Enlightenment with expressions such as ‘Mankind is so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us nothing new or strange in this particular’ (cf Braaten 1966:35-36), many New Testament scholars set out to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature. Bound to a closed naturalistic worldview, they tried to determine ‘what actually happened.’

As more and more scholars started interpreting the New Testament in strict historical terms, the historico-critical paradigm gradually replaced the pre-
critical view of history in academic circles as the dominant paradigm. This paradigm, however, up to the present does not merely reflect a method of academic study, but a total view of human life where all that is now to be held to be real is that which can be understood historically. Although it is an oversimplification to speak of the historico-critical paradigm, since there are many views as to what historical criticism is and what its purpose and functions are, there is general agreement amongst the majority of scholars within this macro-paradigm about a number of aspects, namely that

1 New Testament texts can only be fully understood through a proper knowledge of their genetic processes, such as the historical situation of the respective authors and their original readers;
2 texts consist of parts each having their own history of growth;
3 certain analytical tools are needed to solve the (historical) problems which scholars have identified. Methods such as Redaktionsgeschichte, Formgeschichte, and Traditionsgeschichte (as meso-paradigms) were therefore developed as problem-solving mechanisms.

With the help of the method mentioned above, which determine what can be studied and in what manner, scholars spend most of their time investigating different aspects pertaining to the genesis of the New Testament documents. This includes, amongst others, investigations into the Sitze im Leben of these documents, the historical location of their original readers, developments from the oral to the literary phases of the Gospels, the isolation of the form and contents of the traditional materials used by the New Testament authors in order to determine the nature and extent of their activity in collecting, arranging and editing their documents, etcetera (cf Lührmann 1984; Berger 1987; Egger 1987; Strecker and Maier 1989).

4 STUDIES ON THE UMWELT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Scholars such as Schürer and Deissmann played a decisive role in the formation of this mesparadigm which studies the Zeitgeschichte and Umwelt of the New Testament. In 1874 Schürer published his epoch-making Lehrbuch der neustamentlichen Zeitgeschichte. Further greatly expanded editions, which were published under the new title Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi, followed between 1886-1909.

Strongly influenced by F Weber's views on Judaism, Schürer set out to give a detailed account of the religious and political history of the Jewish people from the time of the Maccabees to the destruction of Jerusalem. His purpose was to provide a historical context within which the New Testament documents could be understood. Schürer expresses this intention clearly in his introduction
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to the first volume (1973: 1):

The task of the New Testament scholar, when enquiring into the birth of Christianity, is to relate Jesus and the Gospel, not only to the Old Testament, but also, and above all, to the Jewish world of his time.

From this it is clear that Schürer obviously did not wish to present a construction of Judaism purely for its own sake and on its own terms, but as a sort of background to the New Testament which only covers topics of interest to Christianity and leaves out the rest.

In Licht vom Osten Deissmann, using papyri, potsherds and inscriptions, set out to prove that the vocabulary of the New Testament is not artistically perfect, but ‘daß das Neue Testament im großen und ganzen ein Denkmal der spät­griechischen Umgangssprache ist, in seinen weit überwiegenden Bestandteilen das Denkmal einer mehr oder weniger volkstümlicher Umgangssprache’ (1923: 53).

In his comparisons of the New Testament with the nonliterary texts of the Roman Empire in the period which led up to and witnessed the rise and development of early Christianity, he further proved that ‘die soziale Struktur des Urchristentum weist uns durchaus in die unteren und in die mittleren Schichten’ (1923: 6). In the same vein as Schürer, Deissmann’s investigation of the ‘non­literary written memorials’ of the Roman empire was not undertaken purely for its own sake. In fact ‘sie lehren uns das Neue Testament und damit das Urchristentum:

1 sprachgeschichtlich richtig würdigen;
2 sie geben uns Fingerzeige für das richtige literargeschichtliche Verständnis des Neuen Testaments’ (1923: 23).

What are the common denominators between the above-mentioned monographs and other similar works? In other words: why are they classified under the same rubric as a meso-paradigm? In order to provide answers to these questions, we must now briefly investigate

1 the type of problems which prominent studies within this field of research have identified as objects of investigation;
2 their methodology in the eventual solving of these problems. This will enable us to draw some conclusions with regards to the theoretical framework which adherents of this meso-paradigm share.

Scholars who study the Zeitgeschichte of the New Testament take as their point
of departure the fact that these documents must be interpreted against the histori­cal background of the world of the first century A D. Although minor disagree­ments exist (on micro-paradigmatic level) as to whether this ‘background’ refers to the more encompassing Weltgeschichte, or only to the immediate Um­welt of the early church, scholars are unanimously of the opinion that knowl­edge of the different institutions, including the political, cultural, social, eco­nomic, religious, philosophical-intellectual and geographical environments of the first-century world, is necessary in order to understand the ‘Eigenart und Bedeutung’ of Jesus and the early church (Reicke 1982: 1). These assumptions at the same time also demarcate the field of study, and provide the questions which adherents of this paradigm have to address.

Schürer and Deissmann developed a distinctive methodology in their efforts to provide an encompassing historical framework within which the individual New Testament documents could be analysed.

In the first place they identified the relevant Jewish and Hellenistic sources during the periods under consideration (cf Schürer 1973: 17-122; Deissmann 1923: 214-334). These sources were then classified in order of importance according to their ability to recount ‘the principal events and often even the minute details of the history of that period,’ and their historical reliability (cf Schürer 1973: 17). Whereas Schürer (1987: 177-676) focussed on the extant Jewish literary texts as chief sources of information about the intellectual and spiritual life of the Jews in the first century, Deissmann (1923: 1-29) in his turn tried to fill the gaps in the historical background of primitive Christianity by studying the non-literary materials of the Roman world.

In the second place they offered general descriptions of the different aspects of the Umwelt of the New Testament according to their particular aims. Schürer, for example, focussed on a historical survey of the Jewish people between 175 BC and AD 135, as well as on their cultural setting and their political and religious institutions and practices. Both Schürer and Deissmann assumed that the data which they selected from the extant written sources according to their criteria of historicity were in fact ‘neutral’ historical information which could be removed from its original intra-textual contexts and, together with information from other sources, placed in a new synoptic framework, and still retain its original meaning.


Many similar investigations soon followed suit which not only advanced
from the same presuppositions and methodology, but also addressed the same kind of questions (cf Jeremias 1961; Lohse 1976; Koester 1982). As a matter of fact, the following comparison (diagram 1) of publications in this field of research makes it clear that a coherent research tradition eventually developed amongst a large group of scholars.

**Diagram 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodological exposition</th>
<th>Use of original sources</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Christianity and Umwelt</th>
<th>Religious context</th>
<th>Social context</th>
<th>Political context</th>
<th>Other aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lohse (1976)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dommershausen (1977)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conzelmann/Lindemann (1982)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reicke (1982)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaney (1984)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roetzel (1985)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price (1987)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Low frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High frequency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *zeitgeschichtliche* approach to the New Testament is a descriptive approach. In other words it (usually) does not advance beyond the collection and description of historical data to one or other form of historical explanation as, for example, *Religionsgeschichte* does, except to locate early Christianity within this historical framework (Diagram 1). Its main objective is to establish historical scenarios of the first-century world. With this objective in mind, scholars approach the extant Jewish and Hellenistic documents as their main sources of information. (At least, the pioneers of this approach did, and some present researchers still do. Others simply use secondary sources.) These sources are
viewed only as potential databanks from which to extract the necessary historical information (the so-called 'what happened?' type of information), and not as texts in their own right with a life of their own. The available data from the different historical sources are then interpreted and systematised, not only according to each scholar's specific goals, but also according to the above-mentioned shared objectives. These interpretations are then presented as 'objective' descriptions of the *Umwelt* of the New Testament. However, the historical world and culture described in these studies often look amazingly like the world of the adherents of this approach.

It is astounding that scholars within this approach seldom, if ever, find it necessary to offer any theoretical grounding for the presuppositions and methodology they all slavishly follow, except for a few general remarks (usually in the introductions to their publications) about the necessity of background information for the study of the New Testament. The only logical explanation for this situation is that the pioneers within this approach's assumptions and methodology were viewed as so successful at the solving of problems by other scholars that they uncritically 'bought the whole package'.

*Zeitgeschichtliche* studies play a relatively small role in the exegetical process within the historico-critical approach. Their function is generally reduced to that of a supplier of the decor which the 'actual' exegetical methods such as *Religionsgeschichte* and *Formgeschichte* make use of. Sadly then, information on the background of the New Testament is viewed by many scholars merely as illustrative and helpful, as a sort of a 'vantage-point' from where to proceed to the actual religious and theological issues, but not as essential to the interpretative task.

**5 THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Since the 1970s John Gager, Wayne Meeks, Gerd Theissen and a host of other scholars have set out to interpret the New Testament with the aid of sociological theories and models. They were, however, not the first to venture to these pastures in their search for analytical tools that would enable them to open up new systems of knowledge with regard to the lifeworlds of the New Testament documents. Scholars such as Troeltsch, Von Dobschütz, Dibelius and the Chicago School at the beginning of the 20th century undertook pioneer work in this direction, but their efforts were soon replaced by the form-critical method and dialectic theology in the 1920s, which at that time showed more promise with regard to the solving of the problems which then confronted New Testament scholars. The renaissance of the sociological analysis of the New Testament in the 1970s, however, attracted a large, and enduring, group of scholars. Studies of this nature were soon bundled together under the rubric of
what was initially called 'the sociological approach to the New Testament'. However, due to the explicit use of theories from a broad range of social sciences, many scholars prefer to call it the social-scientific approach. Without giving yet another overview of the social-scientific approach (cf in this regard Kee 1989; Holmberg 1990; Van Eck 1993), a few remarks concerning the methodology and epistemology in this field of research are necessary in order to evaluate this approach in terms of Kuhn's model.

The renaissance of the social-scientific approach to the New Testament has been ascribed to many factors, including the following:

1. An increase in social awareness, which prompts questions about the social matrix out of which the New Testament documents arose.
2. The revival of sociological studies in general.
3. A growing discontent amongst exegetes with the results of historico-critical studies; in particular their inability to address the relation between social factors and the theological ideas which are encoded in the New Testament documents.

Gerd Theissen, because of his innovative and sustained interpretations of the Palestinian Jesus movement, which, according to him, consisted of so-called Wandercharismaiker and local sympathisers in the different communities, is regarded as one of the leading figures in this field, even though his works lack the explicit articulation of a theoretical framework with regard to sociological models.

In the first place Theissen identified a 'new' field of study (which in turn produced its own set of questions), namely the 'typisches zwischenmenschliches Verhalten in der Jesusbewegung', and combined it with the traditional field of study of historical criticism, namely the Jesus movement's 'Wechselwirkung mit der jüdisch-palästinischen Gesamtgesellschaft' (1977:9). Secondly, he approached this field of study from a new angle of incidence, the functionalist approach (and in this regard made extensive use of role analysis). But at the same time he still concerned himself very much with the historico-critical paradigm. The form-critical method in particular occupied a prominent place in his 'constructive' analyses of the Sitze im Leben of the New Testament texts. Although he also experienced discomfort with some of the results of the historico-critical paradigm, he still regarded his research as an extension thereof. Theissen then, obviously aware of anomalies within the historico-critical paradigm with regard to its problem-solving activities, set out, with the aid of a new epistemological theory which he combined with the analytical tools of the historico-critical approach, to modify this paradigm, and in the process eliminate the apparent conflict he and many other scholars experienced.
John Gager made use of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's phenomenological approach to the sociology of knowledge, as well as of Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance in his analysis of early Christianity as a millenarian movement. The failure of historical criticism to effectively address the interrelation of theological concepts and social reality, as a violation of the initial promise it offered in this regard, caused Gager to adopt new analytical instruments to solve these 'problems' (1975:4-14). By changing many of the historico-critical paradigm's theoretical generalisations, and by replacing its methods, he, in fact, contributed to the reconstruction of the field of New Testament research. While Theissen's works then represent a transitional phase, an overlap (although not complete) between problems that can be solved by the historical and sociological approaches, Gager's seminal work in 1975 represents an important break with historical-criticism's tradition of scientific practice. He not only placed the New Testament data in a new system of relations, but also analysed it from a different theoretical framework. The same can also be said of Wayne Meeks who, by making use of insights from the sociology of knowledge as well as anthropology, studied the myth of the descent and ascent of Jesus in the Gospel of John in order to determine what social and ideological functions it might have served in the Johanine community (1972:44-72).

Many Biblical scholars, realising the 'promise' social-scientific theories held out with regard to the conceptualization and solving of existing problems from a new angle of incidence, and the opening up of new systems of knowledge, since the 1970s have begun to avail themselves of these theories and models in their analyses of the social dimensions of the New Testament texts and the impact of the different social forces which helped to shape the identity of the early Christian communities. Whereas the focus of historico-critical studies has been upon historical matters, aspects such as the influence of the existing social systems, the structures, roles, group interests, conflicts, modes of control, symbols, ideologies in the early Christian communities, etcetera, now became focal points of investigation. In other words, a new roster of puzzles which had to be solved was put on the table by the New Testament scholars who, on a rather high level of abstraction, gradually began sharing a common 'belief' in the problem-solving capacity of social scientific models.

In spite of the fact that the scholars who availed themselves of the resources of the social sciences were gradually associated with a new paradigm, there is, as yet, no consensus among them with regard to presuppositions, agendas and methodologies. From an empirical perspective at least two prominent groups have developed in this regard (cf however Craffert 1991).

The first group focusses mainly on the social description and analysis of early Christianity by using the findings of history, archaeology, ancient literature and sociological theories (cf Blasi 1987; Ebertz 1987; Horsley 1989; Mac-
Donald 1989). Their aim, broadly defined, is to form a picture of the history, social organisation, religious life, social institutions, horizons of consciousness, symbolic universes, etcetera, of early Christianity. As is the case with studies on the Umwelt of the New Testament, many of these studies also produce the social framework (the 'decor') within which the respective New Testament texts must be analysed; the major point of difference (apart from the new areas of investigation which they exploited) being that these social descriptions consciously focus on the 'kausale und funktionale Verknüpfung' of the available social data (Schmeller 1989a:103).

Theissen and other 'pioneers' of the sociological approach in the 1970s undoubtedly had a strong (implicit and explicit) influence on scholars who, since this time, have focussed on early Christianity as a social movement and its socio-historical context. This is evident from, among others

1. the joining of traditional historico-critical methods and social scientific theories (cf Schmeller 1989b:16-21);
2. the combination of archaeological and philological evidence with the aforementioned theories in a cross-disciplinary effort to discern the life of early Christianity within the first century world (cf White 1986);
3. the focus on description, on the 'what' of early Christianity, with little explanations as to the 'how' and 'why' of its structure and dynamics.

The second group moved beyond the collection of social data and their description to a comprehensive method of social scientific interpretation where the modes of analysis and processes of explanation of the first-century social world and the New Testament texts are guided by models from the social sciences. The publication of the North American scholar, Bruce Malina's cultural-anthropological study of the pivotal values, social institutions, dyadic personality types and purity rules of the Mediterranean world of the first century in 1981 played an important role in this regard. Malina, and the group of scholars who soon followed suit, make extensive use of cross-cultural models from a broad spectrum of social sciences in their analyses of the world(s) of the New Testament, as well as in their efforts to uncover the social meanings, structures and values encoded in these ancient texts.

Malina (1986:119-133; 1992:66-87) endeavours, with the help of explicit social science models, to provide scenarios of the first century Mediterranean world within which the original communication took place. For him, this kind of information does not just provide interesting illustrations, as is the case with many studies on the background of the New Testament within the historico-critical paradigm. It is rather the interpretative mechanism for understanding the New Testament and its lifeworld.
Malina's social scientific analysis of the New Testament and its world has explicitly provided a conceptual model from which a coherent tradition of scientific research developed, particularly among North American scholars. Their publications are characterised by

1. the consistent application of social scientific theories and models (cf Neyrey, 1990; 1991; Atkins 1991; McVann 1993). This entails the selection of models which do not only allow for validation, but, more importantly, also for cross-cultural comparison between alien groups. These models are then explicitly used in the analysis of the first century Mediterranean world which is depicted, amongst others, in the New Testament documents;

2. an uncritical acceptance, and further refinement of Malina's basic construction of first-century Mediterranean society's values, social institutions, roles and customs (cf Van Eck 1993; Van Aarde & Van Eck 1993);

3. an avoidance of strictly historical matters such as the reconstruction of historical situations and investigations into the diachronic sequence of particular events (cf Joubert 1990; Pilch 1992; Elliott 1992);

4. the 'foregrounding' of social information. In other words, the interrelationship between, and the impact of the meaning systems and social structures of the Mediterranean world on the New Testament texts are considered crucial to the interpretative process within this approach (cf Moxnes 1988; Van Aarde 1993).

6 NEW PARADIGMS IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES?

Are studies on the lifeworlds of the New Testament scholarship heading for a new paradigm, or is the historico-critical paradigm still alive and well and the formation of a new paradigm (which will integrate all dimensions of New Testament texts into a single model) still a long way off? And how should we view the position of the social scientific approach in this regard?

In response to these questions, it should be noted in the first place that, due to influence of a whole range of social factors on the perpetuation of studies on the Umwelt of the New Testament within the historico-critical paradigm, this approach as yet has not died of old age. But secondly, the social scientific approach displays many aspects which, according to Kuhn's model, point to a new paradigm. However, to view the social-scientific approach in its entirety as a new macro-paradigm is somewhat problematic. As we have seen above, the social descriptive approach in eclectic fashion avails itself of theories from a wide range of scientific disciplines in its descriptions of early Christianity and its Umwelt. Many scholars within this approach, due to their sustained interest in historical questions, keep close ties with the historico-critical approach, and some even view their research as a logical extension thereof, as a sort of a new
meso-paradigm within this approach. Other scholars within this field, however, have moved in the direction of a more consistent sociological approach: they offer careful explanations of the sociological theories which they make use of, and point out how these theories enlighten the New Testament texts. It is therefore quite difficult to pinpoint the social descriptive approach in terms of Kuhn’s model, since some scholars within this approach only use a new terminology and reorganise well-known data into new categories, but their efforts do not lead to new scientific world view which alters a broad spectrum of Biblical scholars’ perceptions of phenomena. Other scholars within this approach, however, have indeed succeeded in exploiting new systems of knowledge (cf Meeks 1983; Crossan 1991). This approach, in terms of Kuhn’s model, therefore finds itself somewhere on a continuum between a process of modification of existing theories within the historico-critical paradigm, and the formation of a new meso-paradigm.

On the other hand, the consistent social-scientific approach ‘inaugurated’ by Malina, reflects salient features distinctive of a new paradigm: Underlying this approach is a new scientific worldview, which is reflected in a new methodological and conceptual apparatus and a new epistemology, according to which the New Testament texts and other first-century documents are no longer viewed as sources for historical reconstruction (from which background information can be withdrawn at will), but rather as social products rooted in particular social systems. The social frames of reference within which they were produced therefore play a crucial role in the interpretative process. But, at the same time, the exegetical, ideological and historical dimensions of the New Testament texts are also addressed within the parameters of this approach. But what then about the position of ‘background studies’ within the historico-critical paradigm; since it has definitely not been replaced by the social scientific approach? In strict Kuhnian terms there can only be one dominant scientific paradigm at a time, which would mean either the historico-critical paradigm or a post-critical paradigm. However, this view of Kuhn applies only to the natural sciences, not to theology and the social sciences. The scientific character of theories (from a theory of science perspective), and the promise which any new theory holds out with regard to its problem solving capacity (from a sociology of knowledge perspective), rather than the amount of paradigms at a particular time, should be our only criterion in this regard. As a matter of fact, the existence of more than one paradigm can be of importance for the opening of new vistas with regard to the New Testament. The present situation with regard to studies on the world of the New Testament is thus more or less as follows:

1 Because of the formation of a coherent, historico-critical school of thought on macro-paradigmatic level worldwide, studies on the Umwelt of the New
Testament will probably continue along the same lines as before.

2 Because of inconsistencies with regard to studies on the background of the New Testament's problem-solving abilities, adjustments and modifications have been made to the description of historical and social data via the introduction of a new terminology and some new theoretical categories.

3 Because of the persistent combination of historical methods and sociological theories in many socio-historical studies, the contours of a new scientific community within the ranks of the historico-critical approach are becoming more and more visible. The strong emphasis on historical matters though, and the fact that many scholars within this approach view their work as complementary to the other meso-paradigms of historical criticism, at present necessitates the accommodation thereof under the rubric of the historico-critical approach.

4 A new macro-paradigm has emerged in the 1980s, namely, the social scientific approach. Within this paradigm models from the social sciences are explicitly used to explain the New Testament texts, as well as to illuminate salient features of the first-century Mediterranean world and early Christian societies.

What is the future then of studies on the world(s) of the New Testament?

In the first place, the historico-critical approach to the Umwelt of the New Testament has not been dethroned. Many scholars will therefore continue along its secure, well-trodden paths to gather historical information to provide the decor for the actual exegetical meso-paradigms. Adherents of this paradigm will also continue to defend their methodology against criticism from the ranks of the social scientific approach, and to adjust certain aspects thereof.

Secondly, adherents of the social descriptive approach will progressively define and demarcate their field of study, which will have important consequences for their position either within the historico-critical paradigm or within the social scientific approach. An aspect which needs urgent clarification in this regard is the precise relationship between history and the social sciences.

Thirdly, adherents of the social scientific approach will continue to market their approach and seek out new converts. At the same time they will refine it, and probably also identify some new meso-paradigms.

Within the 'proliferation' of theories with regard to the socio-historical world of the New Testament, a healthy cross-fertilisation is needed; that is, constant interdisciplinary (inter-paradigmatic?) discourse, as well as toleration of other viewpoints and approaches. Scientific research within the parameters of a particular paradigm does not per se imply the termination of all forms of contact and a retreat into one's own scientific ivory tower. Although each paradigm has its own kernel of scientific presuppositions, theories, methods, etcetera, these
aspects should not be absolutised. Such a situation will undoubtedly slacken the advance of New Testament research in general. Van Aarde’s remark in this regard is very valid: ‘Advance can also exist in the toleration for plurality as such’ (1988:51).

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