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CONFLICT IN THE MIRACLE STORIES

A Socio-Exegetical Study of Matthew 8 and 9

EVERT-JAN VLEDDER





**JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
SUPPLEMENT SERIES**

152

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Sheffield Academic Press

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Journal for the Study of the New Testament
Supplement Series 152



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Published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd
Mansion House
19 Kingfield Road
Sheffield S11 9AS
England

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

EISBN 9781850756996

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Financial assistance from the following organizations is hereby acknowledged: *Stichting: Het Scholten–Cordes Fonds*, Aert Nesstraat 45, 3000 AM Rotterdam, The Netherlands; *Stichting ‘Aanpakken’*, Jachtlaan 128, 7313 ED Apeldoorn, The Netherlands and *Stichting Zonneweelde*, Van Heenvlietlaan 416 IV, 1083 CS Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Opinions expressed in this study, or conclusions drawn, are those of the author and not necessarily those of these organizations.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>AusBR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
<i>BAGD</i>	W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
<i>BEvT</i>	<i>Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie</i>
<i>BiLiSe</i>	Bible and Literature Series
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BJS</i>	<i>Brown Judaic Studies</i>
<i>Br J Social</i>	<i>British Journal of Sociology</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>BU</i>	Biblische Untersuchungen
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FRLANT</i>	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>HNT</i>	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
<i>HSRC</i>	Human Science Research Council
<i>HTKNT</i>	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Hervormde Teologiese Studies</i>
<i>HTS Suppl</i>	<i>Hervormde Teologiese Studies, Supplement</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>J Confl Res</i>	<i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LV</i>	<i>Lumen Vitae</i>
<i>LWF.D</i>	<i>Lutheran World Federation Documentation</i>

<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
RNT	Regensburger Neues Testament
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLSP	SBL Seminar Papers
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
<i>Social Forc</i>	<i>Social Forces</i>
<i>ThEv(SA)</i>	<i>Theologica Evangelica: Pretoria</i>
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>TQ</i>	<i>Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UBS	United Bible Societies
WdF	Wege der Forschung
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

INTRODUCTION

In all times the discussion about the miracle problem presents itself anew, and therefore was never laid to rest.¹

Through the ages there has always been a great fascination with the wonderful and the miraculous. Whether concerning the miracles of Jesus, or miracles in their broadest sense, it has always remained a fascinating topic in both popular and academic discussion.² The interest in miracles over the ages is clearly illustrated in the historical study of Brown.³ He has done a comprehensive survey of the way miracles were perceived through the centuries.⁴ I personally share this age-old and lively interest and wish to contribute to the discussion. More specifically I wish to contribute to the discussion on the miracle stories in Matthew 8 and 9 because of its neglected character (see Chapter 1 below).⁵

1. A. Suhl, 'Einleitung', in A. Suhl (ed.), *Der Wunderbegriff im Neuen Testament* (WdF, CCXCV; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), p. 1.

2. See for example the short and popular article of S. Freyne, 'Query: Did Jesus Really Work Miracles?', *The Furrow* 26.5 (1975), pp. 283-86; the popular works of D.J. Smit, 'Die Prediking van die Wonderverhale in die Evangelies', in C.W. Burger, B.A. Müller and D.J. Smit (eds.), *Riglyne vir prediking oor die gelykenisse en wonderverhale* (Woord teen die Lig, II/2; Kaapstad: NG Kerk-Uitgewers, 1987), pp. 201-24 and K. McCaslin, *What the Bible Says about Miracles* (What the Bible Says Series; Joplin: College Press, 1988), and the thorough academic works of H. Van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Suhl, *Der Wunderbegriff im Neuen Testament*; C. Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) and A. Van de Beek, *Wonderen en Wonderverhalen* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1991)—to name but a few.

3. Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*.

4. Cf. W.L. Craig, 'Colin Brown, Miracles and the Critical Mind: A Review Article', *JETS* 27.4 (1984), pp. 473-85 (473) and E.J. Vledder, 'n Kritiese evaluasie van Colin Brown se studie: "Miracles and the Critical Mind"', *HTS* 42.2 (1986), pp. 327-38 (327).

5. See U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. II. (Mt 8-17)* (EKK, I/2; Zürich: Benzinger, Verlag 1990), p. 147.

In essence this book will be a socio-exegetical study. It cannot be said better than in the words of Elliott:

The method is *sociological* in that it involves the employment of the perspectives, presuppositions, modes of analysis, comparative models, theories and research of the discipline of sociology [conflict theory]. It is *exegetical* in that it focuses centrally upon a biblical document [Matthew 8 and 9; his emphasis].⁶

The general aim of this socio-exegetical study is the analysis and the interpretation of conflict in the text of Matthew 8 and 9 and, more particularly, the conflict between Jesus (and the Matthean community) and the Jewish leaders.

There is no doubt that conflict in the Gospel of Matthew has been investigated before (see Chapter 1). The implied reader is constantly made aware of the tension in the text. The emphasis here, however, will be more on the *dynamics* of conflict. How does conflict 'work' and why are people in conflict? I intend to use conflict theory, to develop this theory (see Chapter 3) on a relatively high level of abstraction. My aim thus is to offer a systematic way of organizing the information on conflict in order to focus attention on the social structures and their processes. Furthermore I intend to provide the necessary interpretive framework and theoretical jargon to investigate the conflict. The basic question is: 'Why is there conflict between Jesus and the leaders?'

As a model, I have put forward five basic statements:

- (1) All conflicts are essentially conflicts of class/group *interests*. All human activities are driven by the drive to maximize one's own interests.
- (2) Closely related to the above is the urge to *survive*.
- (3) In basically all societies/groups there are those who in terms of *power and authority* are in positions of either domination or subordination.
- (4) Conflict almost always brings about *change*.
- (5) Conflict is *always present as a never ending spiral*.

The thesis is that, according to Matthew, Jesus was in conflict with the Jewish leaders because of their opposing interests. The leaders acted on

6. J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-scientific Criticism of I Peter: Its Situation and Strategy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 8.

behalf of the Roman rulers as retainers, and therefore ignored the interests of the marginalized. Jesus (and the Matthean community) acted on behalf of the marginalized, the lowest classes of society. The community challenged the authority of the Jewish leaders because it was in the process of leaving Judaism and departing from the sphere of authority of the leaders. This was perceived by them as a threat to their position. Furthermore, the community challenged the dormant values of the leaders to forgive and to act mercifully, that is, to act in the interests of the marginalized (which the leaders did not do). The conflict is resolved in an negative way in Mt. 9.34 by the epithet that Jesus was possessed by the devil (by implication this also applies to the community). At the same time the conflict has the potential to go further and challenge the leaders of the community themselves to act in the interests of the marginalized, which I call: 'to become voluntarily marginalized'.

I am aware of the fact that any model unavoidably both obscures *and* reveals. Any model helps us focus on specific aspects and leads to the downplay (or neglect) of others.⁷ We only know a part of the actuality when using a model. It specifies only those aspects of the situation on which it focuses. Alternative aspects are often left out of account.⁸ Or, as Carney says: 'One cannot consider other issue areas or other viewpoints once within the framework of his model's terms of reference.'⁹ My attention is selective and limited, although I have attempted to be methodical and structured in thought—and I am conscious of my viewpoint!—I hope to be stimulating and relevant. Rohrbaugh says that each time a text is read by a new reader, the field of reference tends to shift and multiply because each new reader fills in the text in a unique way.¹⁰ This is often called 'recontextualization'. This refers to the multiple ways different readers may 'complete' a text as a result of reading it from a different social location. This book is thus an own attempt at such a 'recontextualization'.

To achieve the above aim, this book is arranged in five chapters: Chapter 1 will be a short accounting of social-scientific criticism,

7. Cf. J. Powell, 'Social Theory as Exegetical Tool', *Foundations & Facets Forum* 5.4 (1989), pp. 27-40 (28).

8. Cf. T.F. Carney, *The Shape of the Past: Models and Antiquity* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1975), p. 12.

9. Carney, *The Shape of the Past*, p. 34.

10. R.L. Rohrbaugh, 'Social Science and Literary Criticism: What is at Stake?', *HTS* 49.1 and 2 (1993), pp. 221-33 (229).

conflict theory and the use of the model as template and heuristic tool. Furthermore, different scholars will be investigated in terms of their views on the marginalized and their use and explication (or not) of conflict. The aim of this chapter is to account for the epistemological and methodological assumptions, and an attempt will be made to account for the specific contribution I wish to make with regard to Matthew 8 and 9.

In Chapter 2, conflict theory is set against structural functionalism. The latter is unable to explain conflict and coercion in society sufficiently, whereas conflict theory does. An own synthesis is developed, predominantly from the theories of L.A. Coser and R. Dahrendorf. The above-mentioned five statements are derived from this particular chapter.

In between the high level of abstraction on a macro-level (conflict theory; Chapter 2) and the text to be interpreted on a micro-level (Matthew 8 and 9; Chapter 4), Chapter 3 is placed to act on a 'meso-level' and to bring these two poles together. In Chapter 3 the social location of the Matthean community is investigated in terms of the so-called *intra* and *extra muros* debate, that is, was the community still part of Judaism or were they totally on their own? In any case, the community is still related to formative Judaism. It will be argued that they were not on their own yet, but were in a process of parting from Judaism.

The implications of Chapters 2 and 3 are applied to the text of Matthew 8 and 9. Chapter 4 is the exegetical part of the study. Emphasis is placed on the plot as it unfolds in terms of time and causality. Background information and insights from other commentaries are utilized to further highlight the conflict.

All the loose ends are tied up in Chapter 5. The findings of the study are implemented in terms of the five statements: interests, survival, power and authority, change, and the never-ending potentiality of conflict.

Chapter 1

CONFLICT IN THE MIRACLE STORIES INADEQUATELY EXPLAINED

In recent years the miracle stories of the Gospel of Matthew have rather been a step-child of the research.¹

Introduction

Miracles and miracle stories have been investigated in the past from a number of different approaches.² They can be approached from a *form critical perspective*;³ a *Religionsgeschichtliche*-perspective;⁴ the

1. U. Luz, 'Wundergeschichten von Mt 8-9', in G.F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (eds.), *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis for His 60th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 149-65 (147).

2. See E.J. Vledder, 'Conflict in the Miracle Stories in Matthew 8 and 9: A Sociological and Exegetical Study' (DD dissertation; Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1994), pp. 5-12.

3. See R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (FRLANT, 29; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 7th edn, 1967); M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 6th edn, 1971); G. Theissen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten: Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* (StNT, 8; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1974); H.D. Betz, 'The Early Christian Miracle Story: Some Observations on the Form Critical Problem', *Semeia* 11 (1978), pp. 69-81; R.W. Funk, 'The Form of the New Testament Healing Miracle Story', *Semeia* 12 (1978), pp. 57-96.

4. See the works of H. Köster, 'One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels', *HTR* 61 (1968), pp. 203-47; H. Köster, 'Grundtypen und Kriterien frühchristlicher Glaubensbekenntnisse', in H. Köster and J.M. Robinson (eds.), *Entwicklungslinien durch die Welt des frühen Christentums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971); P.J. Achtemeier, 'Gospel Miracle Tradition and the Divine Man', *Int* 26 (1972), pp. 174-97; D.L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (SBLDS, 1; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972); G. Petzke, 'Historizität und Bedeutsamkeit von Wunderberichten: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des religionsgeschichtliche Vergleichs', in H.D. Betz and L. Schotroff (eds.), *Neues Testament und christliche Existenz:*

perspective of *Redaktionsgeschichte*;⁵ or from the narrative viewpoint.⁶ One could furthermore try to determine the historicity of the miracles (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*),⁷ or attempt to answer the question of the probability/possibility of the miracles, depending on what one defines as a miracle.⁸

However, I have not opted for any of these approaches. Not that they are of no value; it is simply that the 'newer' social-scientific approach with regard to the miracle stories has not yet been explored to its full potential, especially in as far as conflict theory is concerned (see below for more detail on this). Therefore, I have chosen the social-scientific method.

Festschrift für H Braun (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), pp. 347-85; J.M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (London: SCM, 1974); C.H. Holladay, *Theios Anér in Hellenistic Judaism: A Critique of the Use of this Category in New Testament Christology* (SBLDS, 40; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); Betz, 'The Early Christian Miracle Story', pp. 69-81; M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (London: Gollancz, 1978); P.H. Menoud, 'Die Bedeutung des Wunders nach dem Neuen Testament', in A. Suhl (ed.), *Der Wunderbegriff im Neuen Testament* (WdF, CCXCV; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), pp. 279-99; H.C. Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World: A Study in Socio-historical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

5. See the works of H.J. Held, 'Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories', in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held (eds.), *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (trans. P. Scott; London: SCM, 1963), pp. 165-299 (165-211); A. Suhl, 'Die Wunder Jesu: Ereignis und Überlieferung', in Suhl, *Der Wunderbegriff im Neuen Testament*, pp. 464-509.

6. See S.M. Praeder, 'Miracle Stories in Christian Antiquity: Some Narrative Elements', *Foundation & Facets Forum* 2.4 (1986), pp. 43-54; J. Engelbrecht, 'Trends in Miracle Research', *Neot* 22 (1988), pp. 139-61 (153).

7. See the works of Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World*, pp. 1-41; E.J. Vledder, 'Die rol van "historisiteit" in die kommunikasie van die wondervertelling: Evaluasie van twee eksegetiese benaderinge', *HTS* 40.2 (1984), pp. 71-119 (84).

8. See J.M. Court, 'The Philosophy of the Synoptic Miracles', *JTS* 23.1 (1972), pp. 1-15 (2); M. Bastin, 'Jesus Worked Miracles: Texts from Matthew 8', *LV* 39.2 (1984), pp. 131-39 (132); Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind*, p. 7; J. Engelbrecht, 'Wonders in die Nuwe Testament', *ThEv(SA)* 17.3 (1984), pp. 4-11 (5); Engelbrecht, 'Trends in Miracle Research', p. 140; Vledder, 'Die rol van "historisiteit" in die kommunikasie van die wondervertelling', p. 79. See also Bultmann's own peculiar way of dealing with the problem of the historicity/possibility of the miracles: R. Bultmann, 'Zur Frage des Wunders', in R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1958), I, pp. 215-28.

Epistemological and Methodological Orientation

The aim of this section is to place my work within the sphere of the so-called social-scientific approach.

The Social-Scientific Approach

There exists a perception that the *Formgeschichte* (and historical criticism as a whole) has failed to lay bare the *Sitz-im-Leben* of New Testament texts. However, in the last two decades there has been a renewed interest in the so-called social sciences.⁹ It is not that historical criticism has been totally abandoned and is now regarded as worthless. The social-scientific approach, as Elliott puts it: ‘... is an *expansion*, not a replacement, of the conventional historical-critical method. It *complements* the other subdisciplines of the exegetical enterprise.’¹⁰ Of course, sociological data have previously been taken into account, but a sociological (social-scientific) approach attempts to do more. Says Elliott:

Social data have been used often merely to ‘round out the picture’, illustrating or clarifying literary or theological conclusions already formulated. What is needed is a procedure for appropriating and applying sociological models and concepts which at each stage of exegetical analysis could aid our understanding and interpretation of the interrelation of literary, theological and sociological aspects and dimensions of composition.¹¹

Malina also, in choosing between a social-scientific and historical-critical method, states, ‘In sum, social science methods can offer biblical interpretation adequate sophistication in determining and articulating the social systems behind the texts under investigation.’¹² This is also

9. Cf. R. Scroggs, ‘The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research’, in N.K. Gottwald (ed.), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 337-56 (339); Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World*, p. 290; P. Van Staden and A.G. Van Aarde, ‘Social Description or Social-scientific Interpretation? A Survey of Modern Scholarship’, *HTS* 47.1 (1991), pp. 55-87 (56); S.J. Joubert, ‘’n Verruimende invalshoek tot die verlede? Die sosiaal-wetenskaplike benadering tot die Nuwe Testament’, *HTS* 47.1 (1991), pp. 39-54 (40).

10. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, p. xix.

11. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, p. 3.

12. B. Malina, ‘The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation’, in Gottwald (ed.), *The Bible and Liberation*, pp. 11-25 (21).

true of the miracle stories, and thus I also wish to take the social sciences as my starting point, because the full potential with regard to the miracle stories of Jesus has not yet been explored. In fact, the question of the sociological function of the miracle stories in the New Testament has long been neglected in favour of an historical-critical approach.¹³

But, even within the broader field of the *social-scientific* criticism, choices have to be made. There seems to be broad consensus that there exist two fundamentally different points of departure within this method, which are easily confused.¹⁴ An overall distinction is made between *socio-historical* (or *social description*), and *social-scientific analysis*.

Social Description. The *socio-historical* or *social descriptive approach* (hereafter called the latter), provides us with the broad background to the New Testament period and the early church. Its focus is description rather than analysis.¹⁵ Van Staden explains this approach as follows: '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. . . . When needed, pieces of the amassed information are fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle.'¹⁶ A good example of a social description of the miracles as

13. Cf. Engelbrecht, 'Trends in Miracle Research', p. 150.

14. Cf. Scroggs, 'The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament', p. 341; Malina, 'The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation', p. 11; W.R. Domeris, 'Social Scientific Study of Early Christian Churches: New Paradigms and Old Questions', in J. Mouton, A.G. Van Aarde and W.S. Vorster (eds.), *Paradigms and Progress in Theology* (HSRC Studies in Research Methodology, 5; Pretoria: HSRC, 1988), pp. 378-93 (379); J. Botha, 'Socio-historiese en sosiologiese interpretasie van die Nuwe Testament', *Koers* 54.4 (1989), pp. 480-508 (485); C. Osiek, 'The New Handmaid: The Bible and the Social Sciences', *TS* 50 (1989), pp. 260-78 (269); P. Van Staden, *Compassion—The Essence of Life: A Social-scientific Study of the Religious Symbolic Universe Reflected in the Ideology/Theology of Luke* (HTS Suppl., 4, Pretoria: Tydskrifafdeling van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, 1991), p. 32; Van Staden and Van Aarde, 'Social Description or Social-scientific Interpretation?' pp. 56-60.

15. Cf. Domeris, 'Social Scientific Study of Early Christian Churches', pp. 379-80; see also Botha, 'Socio-historiese en Sosiologiese Interpretasie van die Nuwe Testament', p. 485.

16. Van Staden, *Compassion—The Essence of Life*, p. 32.

such, is to be found in the works of Kee.¹⁷ Another scholar who deals with the sociological functions of the miracles is Gerd Theissen.¹⁸ But since his work has some implications for this study, it will be dealt with separately in the part on ‘Conflict as phenomenon, studied in relation to the Gospel of Matthew’ (see below).

The social description method is highly compatible and useful to my study, and I will make use of some of the results ‘filling in the gaps’ or ‘rounding out the picture’. However, I will not use this approach as a point of departure and method of research, for it does not appropriately address the *dynamics* of the social conflict that is present in Matthew 8 and 9. I will, in fact, use the perspective of *social-scientific criticism* instead.

Social-Scientific Criticism. The ‘sociological approach/analysis’ refers to the implementation of methods of analysis and research based on epistemologies relevant to the social sciences. It ‘... abstracts data in the sense of unearthing, *making explicit* what is buried and implicit in the narrative discourse’ (my emphasis).¹⁹ To a certain extent, this approach builds on the data of the historian, but much more emphasis is placed on the underlying *dynamics* of the societies, and questions asked are: What type of interactions took place and what kind of conflicts emerged? By understanding these dynamics, we are able to grasp the relations within the texts and perhaps also the texts themselves.²⁰

But when one enters the field of the so-called *social-scientific criticism*, a few more choices have to be made. Scroggs distinguishes the following fields: Typologies, cognitive dissonance, role analysis, sociology of knowledge and Marxist interpretation.²¹ Domeris extends this list to include the use of normative dissonance, legitimation of power struggles, cultural anthropology, and Mary Douglas’s group/grid model.²²

17. Kee, *Miracles in the Early Christian World*; *idem*, *Medicine, Miracle & Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

18. Theissen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten*, pp. 229-61.

19. Van Staden, *Compassion—The Essence of Life*, p. 33.

20. Cf. Scroggs, ‘The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament’, p. 337; see also Botha, ‘Socio-historische en sosiologische interpretatie van die Nuwe Testament’, p. 485.

21. Scroggs, ‘The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament’, pp. 344-56.

22. Domeris, ‘Social Scientific Study of Early Christian Churches’, p. 383; see