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SOCIAL CLASS AS AN ANALYTIC AND HERMENEUTICAL CATEGORY IN BIBLICAL STUDIES*

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It has long been recognized that differentials in wealth and power figure prominently in biblical texts and traditions. Although the presence of the rich and the powerful within the Bible—shadowed by their poor and powerless counterparts—is widely noted and commented on, the formative dynamics and far-reaching effects of grossly unequal concentrations of wealth and power have seldom been conceptualized in a fashion empirical and systematic enough to yield sustained exegetical and hermeneutical insights.

This theoretical lag in analyzing and explaining wealth and power in the Bible follows from three sources which reinforce one another. The first is the traditional hegemony of religious and theological categories in biblical studies, which stubbornly resists sociology as a threat to the religious integrity and authority of scripture. The second source is the controversy within the social sciences themselves over whether wealth and power should be understood principally along structural-functional or conflictual lines.¹ The third source is the embedment of biblical studies in a pervasive capitalist ethos that blunts or denies the existence of significant structural divisions in society. Together these factors discourage and inhibit efforts to understand wealth and power in the Bible as historically generated and reproduced phenomena. Extremes of wealth and power tend to make their appearance in biblical studies—as in popular opinion about contemporary society—as if they are given “facts of nature,” requiring no further explanation. The customary strategies are to view inequalities in wealth and power as the result either of random idiosyncratic personal differences of ability or industry, on the one hand, or the inordinate greed and moral corruption of particular individuals, on the other.² The key analytic tool that could cut through our shallow positivism and

*The presidential address delivered 21 November 1992 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Hilton Hotel, San Francisco, California.

¹ Anthony Giddens and David Held, eds., *Classes, Power, and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

² Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class* (New York: Morrow, 1992).

moralism about wealth and power in biblical societies is the concept of social class.

I. What Is Social Class?

In my judgment, the most illuminating way to understand wealth and power in the Bible—as in all societies—is to understand the relation of groups of people to the process of production of basic goods, which generates and replenishes human society in the perpetual flow of daily life. Social classes may be said to exist whenever one social group is able to appropriate a part of the surplus labor product of other groups. In such a situation of exploitation, wealth and power accrue disproportionately to those who are able to claim and dispose of what others produce. Those who have this power of economic disposal tend also to have political predominance and ideological hegemony.

On this understanding, it is to be emphasized that social class is a dynamic relational term. Social production brings people together and, amid their interaction, the criterion that establishes the presence of social class is whether or not there are those who can dispose of the production of others *de jure* or *de facto*. At base, then, when class is operative there are two classes conjoined in distinctive ways that are mutually conditioning: the exploiters and the exploited, the dominators and the dominated, the ideologically superior and the ideologically inferior. In practice, however, the exploiters and the exploited are usually diversified in sub-classes or class fractions, chiefly according to the degree and manner in which surplus labor value is extracted and distributed in the society. Sub-class differentiation among exploiters and exploited may produce all manner of political coalitions and ideological alignments from situation to situation. Classes are less to be thought of as strata laid down in layers, one on top of the other, than as contending forces in a common field of ever-shifting action seeking to secure their vital interests as they understand them, the dominant class clearly being “one up” in its command over surplus labor value, political power, and ideological supremacy.

The degree to which people in similar or related positions relative to production are conscious of their commonality and pursue joint action differs markedly from society to society and over time within any single society. Classes may be more or less economically, politically, or ideologically active on their own behalf. Action based on common interests may enlist few, many, or most members of a class. The goals pursued may be narrower or broader. The important thing in class analysis is to look for how the social relations of production create groups who participate differentially in goods, services, and ideas, and then to examine how they interact in maintaining and advancing their interests. In short, always to ask some version of Gerhard Lenski's

deceptively simple-looking question, “Who Gets What and Why?”³ This kind of analysis, while conceptually applicable to all class societies, yields diverse configurations over space and time, no two of which are exactly alike. Consequently, social class analysis is eminently compatible with historical methodology that respects change and variety in the human story.⁴

II. Social Class in Biblical Societies

What then are the social classes disclosed in the Bible, and how does a recognition of these classes contribute to literary and historical exegesis?

The productive processes that generate wealth and power in the biblical world centered on land and were precapitalist. The vast majority of people produced food and other life necessities from the earth, working in household or village teams. Since technology and transport were not sufficiently developed to create a large consumer market for manufactured goods, the route to concentrating wealth and power in such circumstances was to gain control over agrarian and pastoral products, which the appropriators could themselves consume or assign to retainers at their discretion or convert into other valuables through trade and acquisition of land. This had been achieved in the ancient Near East by the so-called dawn of civilization, distinguished by the emergence of strong centralized states that siphoned off agrarian and pastoral surpluses through taxation, spawned landholding and merchant groups who profited from peasant indebtedness and high-level international trade, and engaged in warfare and conquest of neighboring lands.

This has been called a Tributary Mode of Production (hereafter TMP) in that, while leaving the work relations of the great majority of people largely unchanged, it laid heavy tribute on the fruits of their labor.⁵ Developments in the western Mediterranean and Aegean areas appear to have been broadly similar to those in the immediate biblical world, although by Greco-Roman times slave labor began to produce the critical mass of surplus labor value. Nonetheless, tributary relations of production imposed on the agrarian multi-

³ Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), title of chap. 1.

⁴ For methodologically sophisticated uses of social class analysis in the studies of three widely separated historical periods, see G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981) 4–98; Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) 3–23; and Gerald M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 3–11. I have cited the pagination of the methodological discussions in the above references.

⁵ Samir Amin, *Class and Nation, Historically and in the Present Crisis* (New York/London: Monthly Review, 1980) 46–70. “Tributary” is a more descriptive term for this mode of production than the older label “Asiatic,” which, in employing the name of the continent where it has most often appeared, fails to characterize the nature of the mode of production as such.

tudes continued among much of the populace dominated by Rome, since in the long run slave production did not prove successful in agriculture. Private ownership of immovable property was also legally enshrined in the classical world on a scale and with a rigor unfamiliar to the ancient Near East, but it appears that, even under Roman rule, Jewish Palestine continued to follow the traditional pattern of customary use holdings that could be lost over time through indebtedness.

The social classes visible in biblical societies may be phrased in such a way as to take account of Israel's history in all periods, within which we can identify shifts in the class configurations that were integral to changing economic, political, and ideological developments.⁶

A Synchronic Social Class Typology

On the one hand, *the dominant tribute-imposing class* consisted of the political elite – native and/or foreign – and their administrative, religious, and military retainers, together with the landholding, merchant, and small manufacturing elites who benefited from state power. All these subsections of the dominant class extracted – or attempted to extract – surplus from the mass of agrarian and pastoral producers, as well as other smaller occupational groups (named below). This extraction of surplus was accomplished by a variety of mechanisms, including imperial tribute, domestic taxation, commercial imposts, *corvée*, slave labor, rent, or debt servicing.

On the other hand, *the dominated tribute-bearing class* consisted of peasants, pastoralists, artisans, priests, slaves, and unskilled workers – all those who did not draw surplus from any other workers but who were structurally subject to their own surplus being taken by members of the dominant class, or who were themselves dependent wage laborers.

Weakness in the dominant class, coupled with resistance or avoidance strategies by the dominated, could reduce the intensity of the exploitation and even, on rare occasions, open up a brief period of relief from all – or most – surplus extraction. Normally this temporary relief was no more than a precarious transition between the fall of one group of exploiters and the rise of another. The peculiarity of earliest Israel is that it enjoyed the longest stretch of tribute-free communal life known to us from any ancient Near Eastern sources.

Diachronic Social Class Developments

Communitarian mode of production. In pre-state Israel we meet the anomaly of a period of about two centuries when the grip of Canaanite city-

⁶ For elaboration of these social class shifts in correlation with the customary periodization of biblical history, see my "Sociology of Ancient Israel" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6. 79–89.

state tributary control over the mountainous hinterland was broken and the previously dominated agrarian and pastoral populace was largely free of surplus extraction. The primary productive units were extended or multifamily households, linked in lineages or protective associations and in tribes. In these farming-herding households, which in some cases included indebted or indentured servants and resident aliens, men and women divided certain tasks and shared others. All members of the household enjoyed the fruit of their arduous collective labor. There remain still unresolved questions about the status and extent of indebted laborers and about the role of chiefs in this society, and exactly how to conceptualize them in relation to class.⁷

In contrast to the Tributary Mode of Production, we might appropriately say that tribal Israel practiced a Household Mode of Production. I prefer, however, to speak of a Communitarian Mode of Production (hereafter CMP), because the success of this tribute-free venture hinged on broad alliances among free producers, formed at the intertribal level, to defend themselves militarily and to grant communally legitimated use holdings to the respective households who assisted one another in aspects of agrarian labor and in the granting of aid to households in need. This was a very particular kind of equality among households, not to be confused with strict equivalence in family organization, size of holdings, or amount of production, and, in particular, not to be understood along the lines of modern individualistic notions of egalitarianism developed since the French Revolution and predicated on doctrines of inalienable human rights. Thus, all attempts to evaluate this Communitarian Mode of Production by modern egalitarian criteria, whether of democracy, anarchism, socialism, or feminism, will inevitably falsify the historically specific situation of early Israel,⁸ whereas anthropological analogies of confederated pre-state societies offer more illuminating comparison. Nonetheless, on balance, the CMP provided its practitioners with a more materially, socially, and ideologically satisfying life than they observed among the tribute-burdened producers in their environment.⁹

Native tributary mode of production. Ironically, with the introduction of social classes at the emergence of the monarchy, Israel entered into the very

⁷ A nuanced social structural understanding of debt servitude and sojourner residency in tribal Israel depends greatly on two debated issues: (1) which provisions of the monarchic redaction of the Covenant Code of Exod 20:22–23:19 are believed to reflect premonarchic conditions; (2) the mix of biological and social processes envisioned in the formation of early Israelite households.

⁸ Carol Meyers, making use of an abundance of archaeological and anthropological—as well as textual—data, characterizes the place of women in the wider premonarchic society (*Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988]). She wisely cautions against positive or negative prejudgments on early Israelite society based on modern notions that ignore the ancient context.

⁹ For modification and nuancing of my concepts and conclusions about premonarchic Israel as a society, subsequent to *The Tribes of Yahweh*, see “How my Mind Has Changed or Remained the Same,” in *The Hebrew Bible in its Social World and in Ours* (SBLSS, forthcoming).

TMP it had struggled free from at its inception and had resisted for decades. Surplus was extracted from producers by state taxation and *corvée*, by elites who exacted interest on debt and imposed rental fees, and by foreign powers whose demands for tribute and indemnity were passed on to the Israelite producers in the form of higher taxes. Over the course of monarchic history, we detect rising and falling sequences of state power, both in its relation to foreign powers and in its relation to native nongovernmental elites. These shifting balances of power in the dominant elites meant that their subjects were exploited variously by native rulers, foreign rulers, and domestic landholders and merchants. Since the exploited populace faced diversified exploiters who did not have identical interests and whose varied forms of domination differed in severity from period to period, it was in the interests of the exploited to use what power they had to diminish the intensity of domination by throwing their support to what they perceived at any given moment as the lesser—or least—of evils among their contending exploiters. This of course raises questions about varying kinds of self-interest among the exploited, the extent to which they were class-conscious, and the channels available to them for gaining political leverage.¹⁰

Foreign tributary mode of production. With the eclipse of both Israelite states, a significant shift within the TMP occurred: the dominance in imposing tribute passed decisively to foreign rulers, although the native elite in restored Judah had considerable leeway to operate as long as they remained loyal, preserved domestic order, and delivered tribute to the imperial power. The imperial dominators preferred to stay at arm's length and govern through the native elite, although under the Hellenistic and Roman regimes, they took a more direct hand in ruling Palestine. In effect, the exploited sub-classes were now continuously subject to two levels of surplus labor extraction: by foreign rulers and by native elites. The domestic tribute was increasingly garnered through the Temple establishment in the form of tithes and offerings.¹¹

Religion, ethnicity, and the tributary mode of production. When early Judaism emerged as a distinctive religiocultural social body that could thrive with minimal political support, religious and ethnic identities became important ways of viewing and articulating class divisions. Consequently, native Jewish elites and their exploited subjects might unite in opposition to foreign domination but with different social programs in view and with different

¹⁰ For elaboration of this reconstruction of social classes in monarchic Israel, see my essay "A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel in the Light of Contemporary Studies of Social Class and Social Stratification," in *The Hebrew Bible in its Social World and in Ours*.

¹¹ Daniel L. Smith, "The Politics of Ezra: Sociological Indicators of Postexilic Judaeon Society," in *Second Temple Studies 1. Persian Period* (ed. P. R. Davies; JSOTSup 117; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 73–97.

understandings of the social import of their shared religion. In contradictory ways, the temple complex of economic, political, and religious institutions served both to give a solidary identity to Jews and to function as the conduit for the extraction of their surpluses.¹²

The correlate of these observations about shifting class dynamics in biblical history is that the internal perceptions and interests of both the dominant and dominated classes varied in clarity and cohesiveness. There was no unrelieved warfare between two solid social blocs, but a long tug-of-war, with momentary truces and skirmishes, breaking out at times into sharp confrontation and crisis. On occasion, members of the dominant class could take action on behalf of—even make common cause with—the exploited, to lessen their grievances when it was felt that their own social survival depended on it. Similarly, members of the dominated classes could be cooperative with—and not merely sullenly resigned to—programs put forward by their dominators when they saw some marginal advantage in doing so. This “fudging” of class lines in the rough and tumble of actual social history is of great importance to a nuanced reading of the social dimensions of biblical texts.¹³

III. Social Class in Biblical Texts

On the ideological plane, which of course included religion, the ideas produced by state officials and their clients claimed that their superior wealth and power were justified by the improved production, domestic peace, freedom from foreign aggression, and blessings of the gods that the state and its client elites provided. These ideas are the dominant ones in the literature of the ancient Near East, produced as it was largely under the auspices of the TMP ruling class. These ruling-class ideas are also articulated in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in royal texts and in some of the wisdom literature, as also in the NT, in Gospel redactions and in second- and third-generation epistolary literature. The counterideas of many subjects of the state were far less sanguine, marked by suspicion or outright accusation that their rulers were in fact parasitic, bringing no long-lasting benefits to the immediate producers, providing illusory social harmony that masked injustices, engaging in wars of expansion that were largely irrelevant—and often damaging—to the interests of the general populace and, through it all, falsely claiming approval by the gods. These “dark” views of the ruling class are only marginally visible in ancient Near Eastern literature but rather amply represented within the Hebrew Bible,

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Temple and Society in Achaemenid Judah,” in *Second Temple Studies I*, ed. Davies, 22–53.

¹³ For a particularly instructive account of how Israelite ruling classes at times acted—or promised to act—on behalf of their exploited subjects in order to solidify political control over them, see Marvin L. Chaney, “Debt Easement in Israelite History and Tradition,” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* ed. D. Jobling, P. L. Day, and G. T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991) 127–39.

under the initial impetus of the CMP, particularly in early poems and laws and in prophets and some wisdom literature, and likewise within the NT, especially in the earliest layers of the Gospels and in James and Revelation.

Granted a sharp class edge in much of the Bible, it is nonetheless true that there are large tracts of biblical literature where the class lineaments are obscure or scrambled for various reasons: because of the nature of the topics treated, or because of the terseness of treatment, or because conflicting class outlooks are joined in the text, or because the social strategy of the text is to try to blur or cross class lines. An important service of a sociological reading of the Bible is to plot the contours of class consciousness and class strategy—when and how they are expressed, ignored, or suppressed—in order to give a convincing social context to the diversities of biblical texts and religious developments. In this task, all of the existing methods of biblical criticism are indispensable aids. The way in which a combination of methods can illuminate the functioning of social class in biblical history is best shown in particular instances. For illustrative purposes, I offer three groups of texts of varying ages and genres: narrative, prophetic speech, and parable. In these texts, considerations of genre criticism and redaction criticism, illuminated by comparative social scientific method, intertwine to disclose social class dynamics that are routinely overlooked by exegetes.

Social Class in Hebrew Bible Narratives

Fortunately, there are narratives in the Hebrew Bible where a fair amount of social historical context and data are given. Narrative genres would seem to be “naturals” for revealing social class, but not uniformly so. In some of these texts, opposing social class perspectives are vividly evident, while, in others, conflicting class outlooks are concealed. The methods of redaction evidently played a key role in censoring the flow of social information and in determining what meaning, if any, the textual frame would assign to the data reported. I give two examples, one in which social class is easier to locate and the other in which it is more veiled even as it is powerfully present.

Secession of the northern tribes. The rebellion of Jeroboam and the secession of the northern tribes are reported in 1 Kings 11–12 with a social realism that stands in acute dissonance with what is said earlier in the book about Solomon’s governmental policies.¹⁴ The accounts of the Solomonic economic program of redistricting, heavy taxation, and forced labor in 1 Kings 4–10 are surrounded with an aura of benign wisdom that induces Solomon’s subjects

¹⁴ For a sociopolitical scenario of Jeroboam’s program and the constituencies supporting it, see Robert B. Coote, *In Defense of Revolution: The Elohistic History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 61–69.

to welcome these harsh measures enthusiastically.¹⁵ At one point, the text—sensitive to some disquiet in the audience—goes out of its way to insist that the *corvée* was not imposed on Israelites but only on Canaanites (1 Kgs 9:20–22). To the contrary, Jeroboam is introduced as the one appointed by Solomon “over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph” (1 Kgs 11:28). The immediate occasion of Jeroboam’s abortive revolt is said to have been Solomon’s building projects in Jerusalem which presumably enlisted north Israelite drafted labor that Jeroboam was expected to muster and direct, but against which he recoiled (1 Kgs 11:27).

Years later, when the north Israelite delegation met Rehoboam at Shechem to negotiate the terms on which his succession to the monarchy might be acceptable, the crucial concession demanded was a lightening or lifting of the *corvée* (1 Kgs 12:3–4). This onerous form of surplus extraction, coupled with taxation in kind, had become a widespread class grievance on which the united monarchy foundered and then split when the Judahite ruling class failed to modify the policy. Although we have no certain social information for the immediately following decades, it is likely that for some time the northern monarchy relinquished use of the *corvée*, at least on the scale Solomon had practiced it, until presumably it was reintroduced by Omri as he sought to ape the Davidic dynasty’s accomplishments.

It is noteworthy that the Deuteronomistic editor attributes the breakup of Solomon’s kingdom to the unbridled sexuality and idolatry of the king’s old age, whereas the narrative of the schism, oblivious to these judgments, lays the responsibility squarely on the monarch’s abusive forced labor policy. Ideologically, Jeroboam ensured religious legitimacy for the new kingdom he was chosen to head by reconstructing the cult of Yahweh on northern territory, completely severed from the priesthood and festival schedule at Jerusalem. By approving places of worship throughout his kingdom, in addition to the royal shrines at Dan and Bethel, Jeroboam honored the wishes of his subjects for local practices of religion that from their perspective were more properly Yahwistic than Jerusalem’s tribute-laden cultic practices (1 Kgs 12:31). The Deuteronomist’s anachronistic “theological” explanation of the schism is altogether out of touch with the social class conflict informing the politics so concretely expressed in the Jeroboam tradition. To be sure, some aspects of the schism remain obscure. Ahijah, the prophet who encourages Jeroboam to rebel, is made to speak almost exclusively in terms of the Deuteronomistic ideology; it is likely, however, that as a Shilonite he was sensitive to the peasant grievances that moved Jeroboam. Absent from the story are Judahite peasants,

¹⁵ David Jobling, “The Commodification of Wisdom in 1 Kings 3–10” (paper presented to the Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible Group, SBL annual meeting, 1987), revised as “‘Forced Labor’: Solomon’s Golden Age and the Question of Literary Representation,” *Semeia* 54 (1992) 57–76.

because they had been exempted from the *corvée*, or because the Deuteronomist did not want to disclose any Judahite resistance to the rule of Rehoboam, or simply because the story of the assembly at Shechem (because it was North Israelite) did not have the populace of Judah in view.

Josiah's reformation. Josiah's reformation, described largely in religious terms in 2 Kings 22–23, has escaped careful class analysis in favor of more literary and theological concerns, such as the relation of the reform to the Deuteronomic law code and the overt religious aims of the reformers. Often the discussion proceeds as though the law code in and of itself was the cause of the reform and its formulators the sole proponents of reform. Above all, the religious dimensions of the reform are abstracted from its social class matrix. In undertaking a social class reading of the situation behind 2 Kings 22–23, we do not have two sharply contradictory points of view as in 1 Kings 4–12, so we have to bring together more textual sources to get a larger reading of the conjunction of social historical circumstances at that watershed moment.

Judah had been a shrunken vassal kingdom of Assyria for seventy-five years, reduced in size, with its ruling class members—both those in and out of government—pushed to wring all they could out of the peasant economic base in order to survive and prosper marginally. Simultaneously, this ruling class was drawn into adopting Assyrian high culture to solidify its precarious political position, further alienating its members from those they exploited. The rapid dissolution of the Assyrian imperial rule in Syria-Palestine early in the reign of Josiah completely altered the class balance of power in Palestine. The political rulers in Jerusalem saw that it might now be possible not only to solidify their hold on Judah but to expand their dominion over the territory and populace of the former northern kingdom of Israel, which no longer functioned as Assyrian provinces. This expansion would open up new economic resources for the crown and for the landholding and merchant elites of Judah.

Given the goals and the resources, what would it take to bring off this ambitious project? It would certainly necessitate concerted military and bureaucratic efforts over a very large area and in the face of a hostile populace to prosecute this program. But in order to enlist, train, and motivate the necessary troops and lesser officials, expanded revenues and a loyal and committed Judahite populace were indispensable. The firm base of the reformation proponents consisted of the king and his court officials, army commanders, priests and prophets attached to Jerusalem, and landowners and merchants of Judah, who had a stake in seeing greater wealth and power flow to Jerusalem.¹⁶ But could the tribute-laden populace of Judah be reliably enlisted in the cause?

¹⁶ Typical of the present trend to trace a coalition of professional elites behind the Deuteronomic reform, rather than a single faction, is Patricia Dutcher-Walls, "The Social Location of the Deuteronomists: A Sociological Study of Factional Politics in Late Pre-exilic Judah," *JOT* 52 (1991) 77–94.

Since there was no way for Josiah to proceed that did not require more revenues from his subjects, his first approach was to rally Judahites with a twin appeal to patriotic fervor and religious purity. The nationalist religious ideology of the Deuteronomists was broadcast in the hopes of building a strong “popular front” in the cause of Israel’s God against Assyrian foreigners and apostate Israelites, north and south. In short, Josiah and his regime aspired to restore the territorial conquests and embody the religious loyalties of Joshua and David. The reform’s bold move to outlaw all Yahwistic worship outside of Jerusalem served both to enhance the authority of the capital and to finance the conquest of the north from the tithes and offerings flowing into the city and from increased trading revenues derived from the obligatory festival pilgrimages.¹⁷ The diversion of funds and religious activities to Jerusalem also devalued local culture and religion, and the effect of Deuteronomic legislation on family life further undercut the autonomy and integrity of the households that still survived in many rural areas.¹⁸ Especially radical was the uprooting of the Passover observance from its longstanding household milieu and its restrictive relocation to Jerusalem.¹⁹ In return for an increase in tribute, service in the army, and the eviscerating of local religious culture, the reforms offered some debt relief and public charity to the needy.

So how did Josiah’s “bread and circuses” policies fare with the great majority of the tribute-obligated populace? Not very well. To begin with, most of the populace of the former northern kingdom had long been alienated from the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem. They deeply resented the compulsory payments and long pilgrimages to Jerusalem and were appalled at the brutal violence that Josiah visited on their cult centers. In Judah, reception of the reforms was doubtless more mixed outside elite circles. Some resonated with the hope of reviving the glorious days of the Davidic empire. Some were attracted to the promise of debt relief. Peasants living close enough to Jerusalem to make easy pilgrimage might be pleased at the convenience, but the violent suppression of Judahite cult sites outside Jerusalem was alienating to many. The rural priests, respected in their communities, were defrocked and angered. The increased revenues to Jerusalem were irritating for some and onerous for many. The measures that struck at local loyalties and threatened household culture and religion were resented. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that a large majority of the Judahite peasantry fell along a spectrum ranging from indifference to open hostility toward the reforms. By

¹⁷ The primacy of fiscal goals in Josiah’s reforms was astutely argued by W. Eugene Claburn, “The Fiscal Basis of Josiah’s Reforms,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 11–22, but his insights have been largely ignored until Nakanose’s recent study (see n. 19).

¹⁸ Naomi Steinberg, “The Deuteronomic Law Code and the Politics of State Centralization,” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis*, ed. Jobling et al., 161–70.

¹⁹ Shigeyuki Nakanose convincingly reconstructs Josiah’s revamped Passover festival as a key factor in radically centralizing the political economy (*Josiah’s Passover: Sociology and the Liberating Bible* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, forthcoming]).

contrast, it is likely that the biggest supporters of the reforms among the exploited sub-classes were day laborers who were descended from refugees of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE or who came off farms in Judah that they had lost to indebtedness. This rootless group, often unemployed, would profit from increased work in military preparations, in public construction, and in service jobs occasioned by the pilgrimage trade. Living in and around Jerusalem, they also stood to gain more from public charity than peasants scattered in the countryside.²⁰

Here then was a draconian reconstitution of government and cult from above, drastically extracting surplus and severely disrupting culture in all major areas of the common life. Stripped to its central point, the reformers offered a trade-off between a more powerful centralized government and cult, on the one hand, and improved living conditions for the general populace, on the other. All in all, the strident reform effort probably did not win over a very sizable base of support, rooted as it was in the dominant class in Jerusalem, resisted almost unanimously in the north, and precariously supported by only a minority of the Judahite exploited class. It could only succeed by immediate force of arms, with the hope of securing conditions for a longer-term revival and expansion of the economic base by incorporating the more fertile northern territories into a political economy orchestrated from Judah. It was hoped that nationalist religious fervor, symbolically and institutionally anchored to the Jerusalem Temple, would provide the ideological sustaining power needed for this monumental endeavor.

As it turned out, the ambitious reform project was cut short in less than twenty years. The freedom from foreign intervention did not last long. Initially Egypt, and then Neo-Babylonia, extended imperial control over Judah. Regrettably, we know very little about how extensively or intensively the reforms were actually carried out, especially the economic, social, and juridical measures in Deuteronomy that are not mentioned in 2 Kings 22–23. Judging from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who wrote some years after Josiah's death, the prestige of the Jerusalem cult was enhanced, but with a virtual superstitious sanctity and without many of the religious purifications that Deuteronomy had mandated. Social injustice and judicial corruption are heavily scored by these prophets, while the sole evidence we possess of social reforms actually having been instituted is one oracle of Jeremiah that praises Josiah for having "judged the cause of the poor and needy" (Jer 21:13–17), which may actually be a reference to wage laborers on royal construction projects who replaced *corvée*, and who were the one group of the depressed populace that profited from the reforms.

²⁰ This contention of Nakanose that wage laborers alone among the exploited Judahite sub-classes stood to gain measurable advantages from the reforms (*Josiah's Passover*) is preferable to Claburn's claim that the reforms were rooted in a peasant movement for national liberation.

Social Class in Hebrew Bible Prophetic Texts

An abundance of prophetic poetic texts presupposes social conflict, and, as with the narratives, they both conceal and reveal social class. In some cases redaction criticism, using social class criteria, is able to uncover the fault lines of social conflict in the text. In other instances we have to work with inferences drawn from what is omitted or avoided in a basically seamless text. Figurative and metaphorical speech, socially and politically innocent at first glance, may be highly charged with social class assumptions and judgments. As with the narratives, I have chosen one instance where the social class situation is recoverable along intertextual and redactional lines, and another where, given the text's position in a known historical trajectory, we can infer social class from stylistic tone and failure to treat certain expected topics highly relevant to the subject matter.

Isaiah on the spoliation of the vineyard. The present text of Isaiah contains two versions of the ruination of the vineyard as a metaphor for the destruction of Israel. By far the better known is the elegant Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7), which, in spite of the difficulty in determining the precise meaning of its opening references to “my beloved,” appears to be a straightforward parable. The surface teaching of the parable is that a social entity variously identified as Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem is corporately responsible for its imminent self-destruction because of injustice and unrighteousness, underscored by the vivid terms “bloodshed” and “outcry.” For our purposes, we may pass by the inconsonance in the analogy that pictures a vineyard as bearing moral responsibility for being infertile. Such metaphorical license is typical enough in the Bible to put Isaiah's device within accepted literary practice. The chief point I would make is that, taken alone, the parable does not obviously premise social class conflict in the society, but suggests rather a breakdown in social order reflected in a soaring crime rate.

It so happens, however, that the Song of the Vineyard does not stand alone, since in 3:13–15 the image of Israel as vineyard is repeated with an emphatic class content. “Yahweh enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: ‘It is you who have devoured the vineyard. The spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?’” On this reading of events, it is the exploiters of the poor who are responsible for the destruction of the whole society. Moreover, it is highly probable that these verses are a redactionally relocated fragment of the original Song of the Vineyard, which, like the parables of Nathan (2 Sam 12:1–15) and the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1–20) addressed to David, was a self-incriminating juridical parable, in this case addressed to the dominant class and probably targeting their appropriation of indebted property.²¹

²¹ Gerald T. Sheppard, “The Anti-Assyrian Redaction and the Canonical Context of Isaiah 1–39,”

although it might equally refer to the whole cluster of abuses that contributed to systemic poverty, including excessive taxation, corrupt courts, and fraudulent business practices. In the absence of this telltale social class specifier, the Song of the Vineyard loses much of its original punch and can be read as an indiscriminate moralizing attack on society from top to bottom. The dilution of the class content in the Song of the Vineyard is yet another instance of the tendency of the redactors of prophetic books to smooth off the jagged edges of class conflict as has been argued in other cases, notably in the so-called “B” and “C” levels of tradition in the books of Amos and Micah.²²

Deutero-Isaiah on the leadership of restored Judah. Information from the book of Kings, coupled with the known deportation policies of ancient Near Eastern empires, makes it clear that the Babylonian exiles addressed by Deutero-Isaiah were members and descendants of the former Judahite political elite. The prophet’s ornate rhetoric is devoted to convincing them that they should prepare themselves for imminent return to Judah, since Cyrus was about to overthrow Babylonian rule and authorize a reconstituted Judahite community. It is striking, however, that the prophet has nothing to say about the Jews who remained in Palestine. They are not expected to play any role in the leadership of restored Judah, but appear only as a welcoming chorus at the good news of the return of the exiles. Moreover, instead of a restored Davidic dynasty, the political functions of a native Jewish king are redistributed between Cyrus as emperor and the body of restored exiles conceived as a kind of theocratic oligarchy. The pervasive assumption of the prophet is that the previously disgraced and discredited exiled leaders have been purified by the experience of exile and will rule with justice and equity over a passively receptive Palestinian citizenry. The social class addressed by the prophet is conceived as a reformed and purged political elite with professional competency and a renewed sense of mission, which it can successfully carry out if it is willing to follow Deutero-Isaiah’s lead.²³ While the text’s manner of expression is idiosyncratic, and its hopefulness extreme, it is rooted in the social experience of those who once ruled Judah and who can envision ruling it again.

In short, the elitist mentality of Deutero-Isaiah is truly “prophetic” of the self-assurance and élan of those Jewish leaders who, returning from exile, took

JBL 104 (1985): 204–11. Employing a different tack, Marvin L. Chaney, “The Song of the Vineyard: Reading Isa 5:1–7 in the Context of Eighth-Century Political Economy” (paper presented in the Social Sciences and the Interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures Section, SBL annual meeting, 1992) uncovers clear signs of the prophet’s condemnation of the exploiting class within 5:1–7 proper that do not necessitate the restoration of 3:13–15 to the body of the song.

²² For Amos, see Robert B. Coote, *Amos Among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 46–134. For Micah, see Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 101–53.

²³ Norman K. Gottwald, “Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40–55: An Eagletonian Reading,” in *Semeia* (vol. on Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts, ed. D. Jobling and T. Pippin, forthcoming).

charge of the rebuilding of Judahite society and religion. In Deutero-Isaiah, we see in bold signature the indestructible commitment to a mission that drove the restored leaders to persist in their efforts to rebuild Judah. Equally clearly revealed is their assumed moral right to leadership, since just punishment and excess of suffering in exile had purified them of their sullied past. The corollary of their right to lead is their certainty that they know what is best for the compliant majority of Jews who had remained in Judah and who would surely follow their lead. This potent social class ideology sustained the restoration project through difficult times, but it also sowed the dragon's teeth of discord in the restored community that bore bitterly opposed factions—evident in Trito-Isaiah and Malachi—and that finally necessitated radical reform measures by Nehemiah, one of their own number, who a century later was able to see that this elite's blindness to the needs and feelings of the subject class would undermine the community disastrously if it were not corrected forthwith. Needless to say, the passionately committed architects of reconstructed Judah depended on the Persian imperial tributary structures to carry out their local program of native tributary rule based on Temple economy and religion.

Social Class in the Parables of Jesus

Social class in the Jesus traditions. Lastly, there is an assortment of Jesus traditions of various genres which only recently has been adequately scrutinized from the perspective of Jesus' location in the social class conflict of his day.²⁴ Heretofore, for the most part, the social interrogation of these traditions has been lopsidedly focused on whether Jesus was violent or nonviolent, usually with the naïve assumption that if Jesus did not advocate or lead a violent movement he could not have been involved in social struggle or political activity. The exposure of this non sequitur has opened the way to new paths of social critical study of the Jesus traditions.

An array of repeated themes in the Jesus traditions speaks overwhelmingly for his deliberate participation in social conflict: his focus on the destitute and marginalized elements of the populace, his open table fellowship, his severe strictures on wealth, his cavalier attitude toward the legitimacy of Roman and Temple taxes, his symbolic attack on the Temple economy, his healing of sickness and demon possession as symptoms of social oppression, and his rejection of the ideology that the personal sin of the victims was the cause of all or most of the social misery he encountered.²⁵ On the other hand, these socially

²⁴ David A. Fiensy, against the backdrop of a society torn by conflict, focuses on the effect of changing land tenure on the lives of peasants (*The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period: The Land is Mine* [Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 20; Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1991]).

²⁵ John Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* [San

confrontational traditions are now enclosed in redactions primarily interested in interpreting Jesus theologically and in toning down the harshness of Jesus' sociopolitical critique of the Jewish and Roman authorities who stood at the pinnacle of his society. The general failure to pursue this discrepancy probably follows from the fact that redaction critics more nearly share the social class perspective of the Gospel redactors than they do the social class perspective of Jesus.

Among the social class criteria now being honed is the test of how particular reported teachings of Jesus would have been heard by his primarily Palestinian peasant audience struggling under the burden of multilayered surplus extraction through tribute to Rome, taxes to Herodian client rulers, tithes and offerings to the Temple, rent payments to landlords, and debt payments to creditors. The reasoning behind this strategy is sound, namely, that the way the teachings of Jesus were likely to have been construed by his peasant audiences gives a more reliable index to what Jesus had in mind than the construals of redactors in urban Christian communities some decades later. The parables of Jesus provide an intriguing test case of this methodology.

Parables of Jesus and economic exploitation. Among the parables attributed to Jesus there is a considerable number whose plots are built up around familiar social class conflicts, especially involving economic exploitation. One thinks immediately of the laborers in the vineyard who receive identical wages for unequal work (Matt 20:1–15), of the traveling man of means who entrusts huge amounts of money to his servants while he is away (Matt 25:14–28 // Luke 19:11–25), of the rebellious tenants who try to seize the absentee landlord's property (Mark 12:1–9 // Matt 21:33–41 // Luke 20:9–16), of a rich man's steward about to lose his job who improves his prospects by reducing the amounts owed by his master's debtors (Luke 16:1–8a), of the rich man and Lazarus, whose fortunes are reversed in the afterlife (Luke 16:19–26), of the insistent widow who presses her case at law until even an unjust judge gives her satisfaction (Luke 18:1–8a), and we could go on with other examples.

The Gospel redactors often clearly label these stories as parables of the kingdom, and, even in instances where they do not, the predominant exegetical tradition has assumed them to be so. Jesus is understood to be using these social conflict paradigms as examples of what God is like in dealing with humans. The result in a number of instances produces a portrait of God as a monarch, merchant, or landlord who high-handedly, even cruelly, exhibits the very social practices, goals, and values that Jesus elsewhere rejects or condemns. Either as redacted or as interpreted over the centuries, these same

Francisco: Harper, 1991] 227–416) and Ediberto Lopez (“The Earliest Traditions About Jesus and Social Stratification” [Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1992]) exegete a broad range of Jesus traditions with the tools of social class analysis, producing perceptive alternatives to many socially diluted traditional interpretations.

parables invite—or appear implicitly to commend—compliant and approving attitudes toward authority figures who behave in oppressive and arbitrary ways contrary to Jesus’ nonparabolic teaching. So we are compelled to ask: Was Jesus meaning to say that this kind of manipulation of people for purposes of gaining wealth and power is condemnable in humans but praiseworthy in God? And, if so, would his peasant audience have accepted this interpretation and looked forward to the establishment of the sort of divine kingdom thus described or implied? There is ample cause for a second look at the presumed kingdom orientation of many of these parables. I shall only indicate a few first steps in rethinking these parables within an alternative hermeneutic to the mainstream of parable scholarship.²⁶

It is completely clear to begin with that in some of these parables God is emphatically not represented by any of the characters in the parable. The unjust judge, for example, is said to entertain “no fear of God and no respect of anyone” (Luke 18:4), and in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, God is represented only by proxy in the person of “Father Abraham,” and in the afterlife at that (Luke 16:24). Thus, even as redacted, the characters in the parables are not homogeneously descriptive of how God acts in human affairs. The unjust judge and the rich man who ignores Lazarus are simply human figures who wield social class power over others, and they are judged to be in the wrong for doing so. It is appropriate to inquire if the same might have been true in other parables as they were originally framed by Jesus.

At this point, it seems to me critical to apply the test of audience reception among Palestinians drawn to Jesus’ teaching. For instance, is it not probable that peasants or wage laborers, on hearing that one servant harbored the money entrusted to him instead of risking it to make profit, would instantly have identified with his blunt reply to the master, “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid . . .” (Matt 25:24–25). This is a vivid colloquial description of the exploitation of surplus labor value at the heart of the class conflict in Palestine, and Jesus’ audience would have felt the sting of it, being little surprised at the undeserved fate of a rash subordinate who had the audacity to “tell off” his master.²⁷

Or, consider another parable, in which the social class superior is customarily thought to be presented in praiseworthy terms. Is it not likely that Jesus’

²⁶ I am particularly indebted to William R. Herzog II (*Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, forthcoming]) for orally providing the key hermeneutical perspective, and many of the exegetical details, for this social class reading of a number of the parables, although the proposal to construe them as wisdom example stories is my own.

²⁷ Richard L. Rohrbaugh offers a similar “reverse reading” of this parable (“A Text of Terror? The Parable of the Talents” [paper delivered at a conference on The Bible in a New Context, Orlando, Florida, 4 January 1992]).

hearers would have smelled sarcastic condescension and hypocritical self-congratulation in the retort of the vineyard owner to his laborers who objected to equal pay for unequal labor, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt 20:15)? Would they not be familiar with such self-trumpeted "generosity" that humiliated and dismissed them as contemptible for daring to speak up in their own interests? From bitter experience they would note that the owner desperately needed the last-minute workers, for whom he was willing to pay a daily subsistence wage only because he had gotten himself "in a jam" by miscalculating his labor needs at the start of the day. They would also observe that he deliberately shamed the laborers who had worked all day by paying them last in front of the others, taunting their powerlessness, laying his stinginess on them—all with the aim of confusing and dividing the work force by putting them at the mercy of his whims and at one another's throats. And would they not have snorted—if not loudly guffawed—over the owner's nasty crack at the expense of the last batch of workers who had been waiting in vain for an employment offer, "Why are you standing around here idle all day?" (Matt 20:6)? Jesus' listeners knew the owner's ideology all too well: Yes, indeed, that's exactly what we are in the exploiter's eyes: selfish ingrates when we do work, and listless idlers when we can't find work! We could easily cite other details in this family of parables that the exploited audience of Jesus would not readily have found acceptable, either as models of divine or human behavior or as counsel about how to regard God and their social class superiors.

All this considered, the outline of an alternative hypothesis suggests itself. It seems probable that a fair number of these parables were not at all intended by Jesus as paradigms of the kingdom, but as negative example stories in the wisdom tradition,²⁸ exposing and clarifying the way things are in a capriciously unjust society, subject to the power and pride of those able to exercise their social class dominance at will. To see in them the genre of a provocative negative wisdom story, aimed at raising the consciousness of the hearers, would be to invert or overthrow much of the moral and theological teaching we have attributed to these stories. Later redactors, in part because they lacked rural Palestinian social class experience and in part because they wanted to be socially and politically palatable to pagan authorities, elided much of the original social class thrust of these wisdom parables.

If this seems dubious on first consideration, we need to recall that this is precisely the way we view eschatology and ecclesiology as differentiating criteria for discerning redactional activity. We recognize that the eschatology of Jesus was considerably different from the eschatology of the redactors, as we also discern that Jesus' notion of the kingdom of God and of his circle of followers differed from the ecclesiology of the redactors. In principle, therefore,

²⁸ Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (FOTL 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 130, 176.

it should not surprise us if the social class perspective of Jesus differed from the social class perspective of the redactors. What is surprising, I think, is that we should have delayed so long to establish methodological and hermeneutical parity among the redactional criteria of eschatology, ecclesiology, and social class.

IV. Social Class as Fate and Gift

My particular social class readings of the foregoing texts are of course partial, open-ended, and debatable. What I have tried to illustrate is a procedure that focuses the input of all relevant methods on the social relations described or implied in texts. Our analysis of a text is never complete until we pose questions about social class, the answers to which will be more or less substantial or persuasive from case to case, as is true of any method. We ask about the economic, political, and ideological aspects of the mode of production exhibited in texts with dizzying combinations and configurations of genre and redaction, without knowing in advance what we will find. We ask these social class questions of the various textual voices, both of speakers identified on the same axis in a story or a poem and of authors and redactors whose messages, more or less openly stated, may be positioned on different axes in a text that has accumulated meanings in passing through various social contexts. To add to the challenge, some of these voices may not want us to know anything about their social conditioning, and we shall have to insist until their identity is revealed. Throughout we are aiming to build up a textured history of the interaction of social classes as disclosed in the efforts of biblical writers to produce textual meanings that signify, validate, defend, and commend varying social practices. Only as we explore the social contents, correlates, and implications of biblical texts do we begin to grasp their full-bodied witness to what mattered to the people who produced, distributed, and consumed them.

In the end, what is probably most exciting and disturbing about trying to do a social class analysis of biblical texts is that to do so adequately we have to acknowledge and take responsibility for our own social class location. This is extraordinarily difficult for North American scholars to do, for all the reasons stated at the beginning of this address, but especially because we do not like the vulnerability that comes with full ownership of social class partiality. Admission of social class may make us anxious, defensive, guilty, or combative, hardly the best attitudes and dispositions for good scholarly work. Moreover, if we have to face up to conflicting class stances both in the biblical world and in our own, we may begin to feel the Bible slipping away as a determinative cultural or religious point of reference.

As long as social class stands as a category external to our interpreting selves, it can only foster hermeneutical heartburn. But once we grasp social class as one of our most significant ways of being in the world, affecting all

that we do, including our biblical interpretation, we gain an unexpected resource. As we frankly embrace our own social class advantages and disadvantages—including our pain that humans should be divided in this way—the anguish and the grandeur of the biblical record dawns upon us with previously unexperienced power. Across the very cultural and social chasms that careful social class analysis opens up between us and the biblical world, we establish a bond with those ancients: we, no less than they, are fragile social creatures, not as much in control as we sometimes fancy but much more graced with possibilities for personal and social transformation than we often dare accept. What begins as fate becomes ultimately a gift.