

THE APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES FROM THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE FOR UNDERSTANDING THE SETTING, TRADITION AND THEOLOGY OF THE PROPHETS

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In recent years the interpretation of the prophetic books has become increasingly complex. Biblical scholars have introduced new methods of investigating the lives of the prophets, their writings and their theology.¹ These approaches have opened up new ways of looking at old problems and given a fresh impetus to the study of the OT. Each study is significant because each strives to shed light on some aspect of a prophet's life or message. In this article the focus of attention will be on an interdisciplinary approach to the study of (1) the historical and social setting of the prophets and their audience, (2) the literary traditions used by the prophets, and (3) the theological message of the prophets.

An understanding of the setting is the first step because it opens a window into the world of the prophets. It provides insight on the people who were prophets and also on Israel's political and theological struggles between 800 and 400 B.C. By gaining an understanding of the various cultural, social, political and economic factors that influenced the prophets one is able to place them in their proper context. It is essential to recognize that many prophetic acts and words include cultural and social clues that reveal a great deal about that particular setting. Although these social and cultural factors influenced how the prophets acted and spoke, it would be wrong to conclude that a prophet's historical or social setting totally determines every aspect of life (as some social scientists do).² In addition to these social forces that mold behavior, there are personal (including genius, imagination and free will) and divine (including supernatural experiences and spiritual direction) influences that sometimes produce actions contrary to the accepted patterns of a society.

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¹ Studies like D. Petersen, *The Role of Israel's Prophets* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), and *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (ed. B. Lang; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) are examples of two interdisciplinary methods.

² J. P. Hewitt and M. L. Hewitt, *Introducing Sociology* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986) 88, and G. A. Herion, "The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History," *JSOT* 34 (1986) 10-18, avoid the deterministic problems by allowing some individual freedom.

These independent sources of understanding life interact with existing explanations within society to produce fresh perspectives on life.

A second ingredient that helps explain each prophet's ministry is the wealth of oral and written tradition that served as a resource for prophetic analysis and proclamation. These traditions reveal something of the literary and theological setting of the prophet. The prophets based their thinking on older theological traditions from the Torah, from temple hymns and from other prophets. The prophetic use of these traditions gave their messages the authority of God's earlier revelation and bridged the distance between the past and the present.

The third area of research is the theological message of the prophets and its development in particular settings. Since the prophets believed that God was concerned with all aspects of life, their words frequently provided a new perspective on the nation's real status before God. Theological words of hope as well as disastrous news of God's great judgment were intertwined within their messages. They spoke the word of the Lord to a people who needed a fresh vision of God and a divine perspective on their theological situation. Insights into each prophet's theology can be derived from a careful study of the interrelationship between the setting, the traditions related to that setting, and the theological messages that the prophet delivered from God. This prophetic concern for making the nation's theological traditions applicable to a new setting was, and still is, of fundamental interest for each generation that desires to hear God speak in a fresh way.

One field of research that interacts with issues related to the social setting, the role of language and tradition, and the interrelationship of setting, tradition and theological ideas is the study of the "sociology of knowledge."³ Although we do not agree with all the assumptions or conclusions of those who use this approach, by applying some of the analytical and synthetic insights from this field of research a broader interdisciplinary perspective for understanding the prophetic message is provided. A number of studies have applied principles from the sociology of knowledge to NT studies, but up to this point the sociological approach has had limited use in OT studies.⁴

Many authors have contributed important theoretical stimulation to the development of the "sociology of knowledge," but Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have directed this discipline away from the more philosophical quest for answers to the why, what and how questions that

³ P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

⁴ R. Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research," *NTS* 26 (1980) 165-179, considers the sociology of knowledge to be "the single most important approach within the field of sociology" as far as the NT is concerned. Some use of this approach is found in OT studies in Petersen, *Roles* 86-89. D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 9-22, 137-142, discusses the possible dangers of this and other sociological approaches. See also E. E. Hindson, "The Sociology of Knowledge and Biblical Interpretation," *Theologia Evangelica* 17 (1984) 33-38.

characterized earlier studies in the sociology of knowledge.⁵ Being social historians, they use an approach to knowledge that deals with everyday knowledge governing a person's understanding of the world. This is the kind of knowledge a child learns from his parents as he grows up. Since almost everything is learned through a person's social relationships with others, most people have a "socially constructed view of reality"—that is, a worldview similar to that of other people in their group.⁶ This construction of reality is made up of cultural traditions (including religious beliefs) that are passed on from one person to another through the use of language in the socialization process.

Because circumstances changed and Israel did not follow their fathers' traditional construction of reality or God's instructions on how to live, the prophets tried to convince the nation to change its behavioral patterns and transform its way of thinking about how the world really works (cf. Rom 12:2). In this process, the prophets were given new words of judgment as well as words of hope for the future. Such information brought about a new understanding of how God does and will rule the world and also how God's view of reality for a particular nation changes due to that nation's response to him (Jer 18:1-12).

I. UNDERSTANDING THE REALITY OF THE SETTING

The sociology of knowledge sets forth several basic theoretical principles that are helpful when analyzing the setting of a prophet's message. First and central to all other considerations is the position that people's common everyday knowledge of the world is derived through social interaction. Although this sociological understanding frequently leads to a rather deterministic view that people are products of their social environment, this theory can be modified to allow for individual creativity, genius and also divine revelation, exceptional sources of knowledge of the world that influence behavior.⁷ Although some behavior is not determined by social influences, it is essentially correct to say that all knowledge (even knowledge from exceptional sources), when shared with others, becomes understood in socially and culturally determined ways. An Israelite might talk about "the hand of the Lord" while an Egyptian might describe a similar phenomenon in mythical terms. Each description is based on socially accepted ways of understanding reality in different cultures.

Because a person's knowledge of reality is primarily derived through social interaction with other people or their thoughts, each person's understanding of their setting is largely defined by their social environment. This learning process allows the child to identify the various parts

⁵ M. Scheler, *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft* (Bern: Francke, 1960 [1925]).

⁶ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 3, 23.

⁷ Ibid. 61 sees a dialectical relationship in which society forms people and people create society.

of his environment in spatial or temporal terms, as positive or negative, living or dead. It also gives a name to each part of reality. To help the child make sense of the world, he is taught the common facts of everyday life by his parents and siblings: "This is dirt, which is not to be eaten; that is a rock, and it is hard; I am your mother, and those things flying in the sky are birds." Such knowledge enables the person to understand the world of that particular group of people. The "way we see things" becomes the child's world of reality. These constructions of the way life is are usually considered self-evident facts, and common everyday knowledge is the basis for all interaction between people. This means that any interpretation of a prophet's message must be based on the prophet's and his audience's knowledge of reality.

When the prophets spoke, they interacted with common everyday knowledge that the audience and the prophet shared as well as knowledge that was based on contrasting conceptions of the way the world runs. Isaiah refers to the burning of Judah's cities (1:7), the medical practice of softening the wounds of the soldier with oil (1:6), the ritual of bringing burnt offerings of rams (1:11), the nation's social responsibility for the poor and the widow (1:17), and the break in Judah's covenant relationship with God (1:1-4). This kind of information about the world of the prophet was present for all areas of life. It made up the various aspects of culture that the prophet's society passed on to its children.

Although social pressure encourages a unified view of the world, every person's experience with nature, with other people, and with God is influenced by a multitude of variables. This means that each person operates both on the basis of a few individual and unique understandings of reality as well as the dominant, culturally-defined concepts of the way things are. On account of this, each prophet's construction of reality is partially consistent with the socio-cultural understanding of the day, yet uniquely different from every other person's experience and knowledge of reality. Both Elijah and the worshipers of Baal believed rain was sent by a divine power, but Elijah thought Yahweh, the God of Israel, was responsible for rain (1 Kgs 17:1-7; 18:1-2, 41-46) while the prophets of Baal claimed that Baal was in charge of fertility and rain. The results of the contest on Mount Carmel justified Elijah's claim. If an interpreter hopes to understand Elijah's ministry he needs to appreciate the prophet's knowledge of reality, how that knowledge of reality was different from that of his audience, and how these conflicting ideas interacted.⁸

Isaiah 1:11-17 reveals that there is a distinction between Isaiah's understanding of the meaning and practice of offering sacrifices to God and that of his audience. Although both parties knew that sacrifices were an acceptable means of worshiping God, Isaiah understood that it was unacceptable to bring these sacrifices to God if one's hands were full of bloodshed (Isa 1:17). Isaiah's purpose is to change his audience's under-

⁸ L. Bonner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

standing of what a person had to do to please God and to motivate them to "stop doing evil, to learn to do good" (1:16-17).

A second sociological principle that is fundamental to the interpretation of the prophets is that people order the details of reality into typical patterns to make sense out of the enormous amount of information they interact with every day. This means that a person does not have to figure out how to respond to a particular setting or person every time one faces that setting or person. Although data concerning nature, social interaction and religious beliefs are categorized in different ways in different cultures, an order that makes sense in each culture is developed. Human activity in every socio-cultural setting falls into patterns of repeated action, creating order out of a world of complex interrelationships. When these habitual ways of doing things become part of the general knowledge that regulates behavior, they are referred to as "institutionalized."⁹ The economic means of maintaining life will often be institutionalized. The planting of grain or vegetables is influenced by climate, the availability of land or other sources of livelihood, learned methods of agriculture, folklore or religious beliefs about planting, social patterns concerning who does the planting, and various other factors that a particular group might consider important. People do not just go out and plant, for planting is done in a prescribed way following socio-culturally defined patterns that become institutionalized. Trade, inheritance rights, gift exchange, dowry systems, the ownership of property, taxation and all other economic activities operate according to expected institutionalized patterns defined by society. These economic institutions are interrelated with accepted social patterns of behavior, for each economic activity is a social event between people. The relationship between individuals is often institutionalized on the basis of age, sex, status, family role, or how peripheral or central one's role is to the power structures in society.¹⁰

Religious taboos, rituals and beliefs about supernatural powers are interconnected in some way to almost every other area of life and tend to stabilize or maintain institutional patterns. The common acceptance of such institutional patterns "legitimizes" or justifies a group's way of looking at the world.¹¹ When a new way of doing things is introduced to a group it seems very foreign and does not seem to fit, but once it is accepted by the majority of people in a group it becomes a legitimate activity. The existence of a common knowledge of reality gives unity and security to social groups because everyone in the group knows what is expected and understands the acceptable ways of behavior. Instead of being faced with the thousands of phenomena of life in random or senseless chaos, data are ordered into relevant patterns that give meaning to the world. Things can fit together because each part of reality functions in ways that are culturally defined as meaningful within the

⁹ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 53-55.

¹⁰ R. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 51-88.

¹¹ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 61.

institutionalized patterns of the social construction of reality of each group.

The institutionalization of relationships results in people taking on typical roles or patterns of behavior.¹² A person's identity is related to the roles that person embodies, and each individual's interpersonal relationships are circumscribed by role expectations. In the theater people take on the stereotyped roles of the villainous knave, the innocent peasant and the just prince. Certain known activities are characteristic of each role. If people would refuse to accept male roles, female roles, leadership roles or religious roles, most institutions would cease to exist. There would be little order, and interpersonal relationships would be in chaos. Children might demand to be treated as adults, fathers might choose to act like unmarried men for a day, or a friend might decide to be an enemy. In many ways the very existence of society and culture is dependent on a common acceptance of one general understanding of the accepted role patterns.

The writings of a prophet are based on each prophet's understanding of the ordering of life around institutional patterns. References to economic, religious and social behavior assume a certain accepted way of doing things. The role of the king, the priest, the prophet, and the rich followed set guidelines accepted in that time period. Sometimes the prophets criticized a wealthy group's ordered construction of reality because their economic dealings were no longer controlled by the social or religious traditions that previously defined these institutionalized patterns of behavior (Amos 3:9-10; 6:1-7; 8:4-8). Religious and culturally defined rituals carried out by priests in the worship at the temple were attacked because they no longer were performed according to set patterns or with the proper heart attitude (Mal 1:6-2:9).

New historical situations developed in Israel with the coming of the monarchy, the urbanization and militarization of the nation, the appearance of a wealthy upper class, and the nation's contact with Canaanite institutions that were different from those traditionally accepted by Israel. With these changes came new moral values, a weakening of social solidarity among tribal members, and the introduction of institutional patterns that ran contrary to God's guidelines for the nation. The prophets were not against change, urbanization, the concept of kingship or variations in some institutional roles per se, but they were against the acceptance of patterns that ran contrary to what God revealed to Israel. The holiness of God did not change, and his demand that his people be holy did not change, but times and new circumstances required changes in what people did to live holy lives.

Each prophet lived at a particular historical time, understood the socio-cultural institutions of that day in a particular way and functioned within that society as a messenger of God. Their knowledge of reality was firmly embedded in both the institutional patterns of their time and the

¹² Petersen, *Roles* 16-34.

word of the Lord that they received. These two pictures of reality were not always consistent, and thus the word from God, which the prophets spoke, frequently contained an alternate construction of reality based on God's previous revelation found in the nation's religious traditions.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITION AND SETTING

The parts of a language are the linguistic building blocks people use to describe their common everyday knowledge of reality in their setting. Language plays a key role because it enables people to (1) socially interact with one another on the basis of commonly accepted linguistic signs that carry meaning, (2) identify, name and remember the phenomena that make up their common knowledge of reality, (3) legitimate or explain the institutional patterns established by a group, and (4) symbolize transcendent (divine) forms of reality beyond the concrete forms that are seen and touched.

The first (and most fundamental) level of understanding reality is gained when a group develops a common way of describing the phenomena of its experience. In order for a group to have a shared knowledge of reality it must designate certain agreed-upon linguistic signs (its language) to represent objects, actions and institutional patterns. Everyone must agree that "boy" refers to a young male and that "marriage" describes a complex relationship of commitment between a male and a female. By giving meaning to these words it is possible for a group's construction of reality to be described and for that people to share the same knowledge of reality. Because of language, people can meaningfully discuss objects or actions that extend far beyond the spatial and temporal limitations of a particular setting. A group's knowledge of reality usually includes what happened many years ago (tradition) as well as what went on yesterday at a relative's house fifty miles away (experience).

Dreams, parables or dramas present a second level of reality: the world of make-believe. Although a nightmare may seem real while a person is asleep, as soon as that person wakes up and calms down it becomes obvious that the dream was all in the mind, that there really never was any danger. Philosophy, art and religious experience are part of a third level of reality, called transcendent reality (or the symbolic universe).¹³ The lower levels of knowledge (identifying objects and the ordering of them) are directly related to a person's more pragmatic everyday activities, but the higher level (transcendent reality) plays the unique role of legitimating each group's construction of reality. Legitimation enables a group to (1) maintain its view of life, (2) integrate the various parts of its worldview, and (3) explain or justify why things are done the way they are done. Every setting contains both the institutional patterns of behavior that make up that group's construction of reality (what is done) as

¹³ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 92-104, call this the "symbolic universe."

well as oral or written traditions concerning transcendent reality. Transcendent reality justifies and integrates the patterns and functions of the institutions within the group's social construction of reality (explaining why it is done this way). These traditions may take the form of ancient religious records that explain how and why the ancestors of the group established an institutional pattern (the tradition about Adam and Eve and the first marriage), moral instructions that reinforce and stabilize family relationships (traditions from Proverbs 5 and 7 warning young men to beware of prostitutes), or myths that integrate the changes of the seasons with the activity of the gods (traditions from the Ugaritic epic of Baal and Anat).¹⁴ Such traditions are passed on from parent to child as part of the socialization process of teaching a child a group's knowledge of reality. Of course each group has its own institutions and its own traditions that legitimate the institutional patterns in their construction of reality.¹⁵

When the prophets spoke, one of their main roles was to legitimate a particular construction of reality, that construction that was consistent with God's transcendent view of reality. The prophets used two methods to legitimate their understanding of reality. First, the prophets retold past traditions. For example, God's power in creating the world was used in Isa 40:25-26 (possibly using tradition similar to Gen 1:16; Ps 89:11; 147:4), the garden of Eden is referred to in Isa 51:3 (see Gen 2:8-10), God's acts of judgment on Sodom are used in Isa 13:19 (see Gen 19:24-25; Deut 29:23), the flood is alluded to in Isa 54:9 (see Gen 9:11, 15), God's care for Israel in the desert is recorded in Isa 48:21 (from traditions in Num 11:18; 20:8; Ps 78:15-16, 20), his instructions concerning worship on the Sabbath are mentioned in Isa 56:1-8 (possibly from traditions like Exod 20:8-11; 31:12-17), his everlasting covenant with David is used in Isa 55:3 (see 2 Sam 7:8-16; Ps 89:2-4, 28-29). Such traditions explain the Israelite way of life; justify various institutionalized practices; and integrate the past with the present, the divine with the human, and the individual parts of life with the whole.

Jeremiah taught that the Israelites should not follow the customs of the other nations (compare this with traditions in Lev 18:3, 30; 20:23; Deut 12:30) or worship gods made from wood and covered with gold (Jer 10:1-4, 8-9; see Exod 20:3-6). Such gods are not real; they are deceitful, worthless and stupid (Jer 10:8, 14-15). Israel's tradition maintains that the real God is the everlasting King, the Maker of all, the One who controls the clouds and water, the One who has all wisdom, the One who shakes the earth in his anger: Yahweh of hosts is his name (10:10, 12, 13, 16). Jeremiah's speech explains why the people should not follow one set of institutional patterns and justifies another interpretation of reality based on Israel's theological traditions. The approved traditions give an integrated construction of reality that includes the beginning of life (creation), the

¹⁴ ANET 129-141.

¹⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 61, 71, 92.

maintaining of life (rain), and the end of life (through punishment) for those who put their hope in idols.

This Hebrew tradition concerning God's construction of transcendent reality is used to legitimate and maintain the order of existing institutions, roles and cultural patterns on the pragmatic level of daily life. The prophets quote these traditions because the nation's new historical setting with its foreign social norms of behavior and its strange theological beliefs was destroying both the ordered transcendent reality that the Hebrews received from God and the way people ordered their lives. Prophetic traditions provided a divine knowledge of reality that was a corrective to Israel's rebellious and sinful attitude toward God's earlier revelation of himself and his ways. The prophets were attempting to transform the people by renewing their minds according to the reality that God had given to them in earlier revelation (cf. Rom 12:2). They were trying to maintain consistency between the Israelite construction of reality and the divine view of reality.

A second method of legitimating a particular view of reality was experience. Isaiah condemns trust in idols because they cannot tell the past or the future or do anything good or evil (Isa 41:21-24; 44:6-8). Experience also tells him that idols are merely pieces of wood, fashioned by men. With one piece of the tree a craftsman makes an idol, but the part of the tree right next to the idol is not valued at all and burnt up. Experience proves that trees cannot answer prayers (44:9-22). Idols cannot even walk; they have to be carried. Idols cannot speak or deliver someone from disaster (45:5-7), but God makes plans, tells what the future will be and then does what he had said he would do (45:9-11). Because Israel's God appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3) and his glory and voice were seen and heard at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5), the Israelites experienced God as a person and as a power. The prophets' construction of reality was consistent with the past and present experience of the nation. Their future predictions were verified when the nation experienced their fulfillment.

In order for the prophets to convey God's revelation of transcendent reality and legitimate their worldview, they employed traditional forms of speech that the people understood. If a prophet chose to use the covenant lawsuit form of speech (Micah 6), the various components would be partially dictated by the traditional socio-cultural understanding of the secular lawsuit in the court. The content would describe God's lawsuit against Israel for breaking the traditional patterns set down in the nation's covenant with God. The prophet Micah used the nation's traditions of God's care for Israel (Mic 6:3-5; see the traditions in Exodus 3-4; 14-15; Numbers 22-24) to show that the people's construction of reality concerning God's requirements (Mic 6:6-7) were not consistent with the transcendent reality that they were to do justice, have steadfast loving-kindness and walk humbly with their God (6:8). In this case the prophet does not say that Israel's institution of sacrifice is wrong but that the cultural pattern is missing the key ingredients (justice, lovingkindness,

humility) that are central to the reality the pattern symbolizes. Because of Israel's failure to maintain a consistency between God's revelation of transcendent reality and their own practices, a new revelation was given and a new setting was predicted ("I will make you sick" instead of "I will bless you," 6:13-16). A thorough understanding of these traditional forms of speech from Israel's cultural background and the theological traditions within them provides a background for explaining the prophetic announcements of a fresh word from the Lord.

III. APPLYING TRADITION TO SETTING BRINGS ABOUT NEW THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

When the prophets spoke the word of the Lord, they not only called the people back to their theological roots (past tradition) but also introduced a theological message that was often new to their audience. Frequently they also predicted a new setting for the nation. These new words were needed because the historical situation of the nation was constantly in flux due to changing political events, yearly differences in the economic prosperity of various groups within the labor force, the weakening of tribal and family solidarity, and increased foreign religious and cultural influences from Phoenicia, Assyria and Babylonia. In addition, the people rebelled against the discipline required to serve God with all their heart. Such new experiences needed to be integrated into each new generation's way of thinking.

These changes caused the prophet Hosea to criticize the priest for leading the people astray (Hos 4:4-10), the kings for depending on other nations instead of God (7:8; 8:8-10), the people for worshiping idols of Baal and involvement in the sacred prostitution at Baal temples (4:11-15; 11:2; 13:1-2), and the merchants for using deceitful scales to oppress the poor (12:7-8). Hosea proclaims that these evils exist because the people have no knowledge of God and his ways (their experience with God and their construction of divine reality is faulty), no love for God, and no truth or real commitment to keeping the stipulations of their covenant relationship (4:1). Because the nation's traditions that reveal God's knowledge of reality are ignored, their present view of reality is inconsistent with God's past revelation of reality. This change in Israel's setting and her different understanding of reality is of great consequence, for it required a change in God's relationship to his people. Hosea delivered the news about God's new relationship to Israel and the new setting that he will bring to the people.

This message included negative words of judgment and positive words of hope. Hosea indicates that God has withdrawn from them because of their sin (5:6). Because their relationship to God has changed, God will chasten them (5:2). He will pour out his wrath on them, and they will suffer the effects of a devastating war (5:8-14; 2 Chronicles 28). In addition to this negative message, there is a positive word of hope concerning

Israel's setting after their judgment. Eventually the nation will acknowledge its guilt and earnestly seek God. They will return to God and learn to know him (Hos 5:15-6:3; 14:1-8). These two new settings for the nation describe transcendent reality and explain why these new situations will come about.

Frequently the prophets attempt to correct the people's construction of reality by quoting and correcting false statements. Ezekiel 18:2-4 (cf. Jer 31:29) records the popular proverb: "The fathers eat sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge." The proverb describes the exiles' understanding of why they have been punished and sent into captivity in Babylon. They claim: "It's not our fault; it was due to the sins of our parents." Such a construction of reality is not totally without foundation and should not be understood as a childish case of blaming someone else for everything that goes wrong. The legal traditions contain the principle that God will visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third or fourth generation (Exod 20:5). In addition, the prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord saying that he would destroy Judah because of the sins of Manasseh, the evil king who ruled Judah a generation earlier (Jer 15:4; see also 2 Kgs 21:10-15; 23:26). But Ezekiel sees that these traditions do not apply to his audience at this time, so he declares the word of the Lord that "the soul that sins, it shall die." This construction of reality is based on legal texts that demand responsibility from the guilty party (Deut 24:16). Although corporate social responsibility was an acceptable way of understanding God's action when a third party did not oppose an evil (Exod 32:7-10), not all punishment can be lumped together under this concept. This example indicates that part of the prophet's activity was involved with applying true and acceptable traditions to the right situation and to the right people. In this case the exiles claimed that God's way was not equitable (Ezek 18:24-29). Ezekiel's tradition about the basis of guilt concludes that the people's ways were not right, that they needed to repent and turn from their iniquity (18:29-32). This new message maintains a fundamental consistency with past constructions of reality about God's just rule of his people, reaffirms the ancient Israelite view of right and wrong behavior, and legitimates a particular social construction of reality on the basis of transcendent reality.

At other times a prophetic word from the Lord presents a choice between two alternative realities. The prophet Jeremiah requested God's word of direction for a small remnant of Jews living in Jerusalem after the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar's army in 587/6 B.C. (Jer 42:1-6). This small band of people had just lived through a great military, economic, social and religious disaster. Judah, God's chosen people, experienced the impossible: God had forsaken them, the nation was destroyed (Jeremiah 39; 52). The assurances of peace from many of the prophets were clearly false (6:14; 8:11-12) because their construction of reality was not consistent with God's word announced through Jeremiah or with the experience of the nation. The people's faith in God's promises

of blessings and an eternal kingdom was shattered (Gen 12:1-3; 2 Sam 7:1-16). Their construction of reality was in confusion. The people believed that their only hope was to flee to Egypt for protection from the Babylonians (Jer 41:17-18; 42:15).

In this setting Jeremiah declares a word of hope and warning (42:9-17). Now, when the people have no possible way of providing for themselves, God invites them to stay in the land. He will build them up and plant them, he will not tear them down or destroy them. He will be with them and have compassion on them; they need not fear the king of Babylon (42:10-12). This construction of reality was directly contrary to what Jeremiah had prophesied earlier (1:10-16) and to what the people had just experienced in the destruction of Jerusalem. Although it was everything the people hoped for, it would require great faith in God to stay in Jerusalem. An act of faith was an implied characteristic of all prophetic appeals, for the prophetic revelation of transcendent reality often did not seem like the thing to do on the basis of human wisdom. In this case Jeremiah's words are legitimated by the fact that he proved to be a true prophet in predicting the fall of Jerusalem.

In order to further legitimate God's promises, Jeremiah indicates what will happen if the people follow their own construction of reality and flee to Egypt for safety: They will see war, famine and pestilence in Egypt, and none of them will survive (42:13-22). In this case the people rejected Jeremiah's new revelation, claiming that he lied, that God had not sent him, that he was repeating Baruch's bad advice so that they would all be killed (43:1-3). The people legitimated their decision on the basis of their political analysis of Baruch and later on the basis of their experience. When they sacrificed to the God of Israel everything went wrong, but when they sacrificed to the Queen of Heaven everything went fine (44:15-19).

This prophecy illustrates the extent to which God's view of a people can change and how important it is to understand the basic principles of God's rule (18:5-10). The fact that Jeremiah gave negative promises of destruction before the fall of Jerusalem and a positive message of hope after its destruction does not mean that Jeremiah has now joined the false prophets. It means that Judah's situation has changed now that it has been punished for its sin. Now God can again offer the possibility of hope if the people will trust in him. History proved that Jeremiah's negative words as well as his positive words were true.

IV. CONCLUSION

This application of a modified form of several principles from the sociology of knowledge illustrates something of the potential of the interdisciplinary method. No attempt has been made to develop a sociological model to circumscribe all types of social interaction. The approach merely intends to expand our understanding of the context or setting of the prophets and their audience, to investigate the prophetic use of tradition

to legitimate a particular worldview (i.e. God's worldview), and to identify the new theological understandings the prophets gave their audiences. The intention is to discover something of the dynamic of the prophetic confrontation with the thought patterns of a world that had lost contact with God's transcendent view of reality. The application of past tradition and experience to the setting of the nation allowed the prophets to persuasively communicate a message that could transform the people's knowledge of reality and bring it into conformity with the mind of God.