

A Study on Max Weber's *Ancient Judaism*: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Yuko Takahashi

Abstract

Max Weber's *Ancient Judaism* is often seen as difficult or simply outdated. However, it contains stimulating perspectives. In order to clarify the theoretical framework, I suggest a comparative reading with *The City in Economy and Society*. The theoretical framework of *Ancient Judaism* can be viewed as an ideal type, 'Israel and Greece'. The ideal type is related with the religious and the political accordingly. Moreover, these are thought of as ambivalent. Observing the concept 'the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility', we can see the sharpened tension between the religious and the political. Certainly, this view would be effected by the severe situation in Germany during and right after the First World War. In spite of that, the work still has some significance in the history of philosophy, especially in Weber's integration of methodologies to interpret complicated social phenomena.

Keywords: *Ancient Judaism*, ethic of responsibility, ethic of ultimate ends, Greece, Israel, Max Weber, methodology, politics, religion, *The City*.

Introduction

Max Weber's *Ancient Judaism*¹ (*Das antike Judentum*)² is thought of as one of his greatest works, but it has not yet received the study it deserves, partly because it requires interdisciplinary treatment, and partly because of the lack of clarity in its theoretical framework.

1. Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and D. Martindale; New York/London: The Free Press, 1952).

2. *Das antike Judentum* first appeared as articles in *Journal for Social Science and Social Policy* (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*). It is now available in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Bd. 44; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1917-1918), pp. 52-138, 349-443, 601-626 and (Bd. 46; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1918-1919), pp. 40-113, 311-66, 541-604. The last article was actually published in 1920, though it is in Bd. 46. After the death of Max Weber on 14 June, 1920, Marianne Weber, his wife, edited *Max Weber Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie III (Das antike Judentum)* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1921). For a

In Old Testament studies,³ *Ancient Judaism* is known to have influenced the leading scholars of the twentieth century, for example, Martin Noth⁴ and Gerhard von Rad.⁵ Weber himself, however, was not an Old Testament scholar, and credit has not been given to him in most cases, thus Bible scholars tend to be indirectly influenced or to criticize the work with only surface understanding of it. Though details of *Ancient Judaism* and its viability for the study of the Old Testament are outdated,⁶ the philosophical aspect of the work still remains.⁷

long time, only these two versions were available for us, yet recently a newer edition has been published. It is *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Das antike Judentum. Schriften und Reden 1911-1920* (ed. E. Otto; MWG I/21; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2005). This version corrected almost all the numerous mistakes, such as typographic errors, that were prevalent in the former two versions. Otto also published a monograph concerning *Ancient Judaism* that he places as a preparation for editing MWG I/21. Eckart Otto, *Max Webers Studien des Antiken Judentums: Historische Grundlegung einer Theorie der Moderne* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2002).

3. The terminology 'Old Testament' has affinity with Christianity, and it can be called 'Hebrew Scripture', but here I use the former one to follow tradition.

4. For example, so-called 'Anphictyony hypothesis'. See Martin Noth, *Geschichte Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn). First edition was published in 1950; English version is *The History of Israel* (trans. and ed. S. Godman; London: A. & C. Black, 1958). See also Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 43, 54. The hypothesis was once widely accepted, but now it is strongly questioned.

5. For example, the typological approach to the theory of 'Holy War' in von Rad. Cf. *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954, 3rd edn). First edition was published in 1951; English version is *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (trans. and ed. M.J. Dawn; Introduction B.C. Ollenberger; Bibliography J.E. Sanderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). In the Introduction, Ollenberger states, 'Gerhard von Rad offers a definition quite different, but his material account of holy war is sometimes strikingly similar to Weber's, and his reliance on a generalized theory of holy war – virtually as an "ideal type" – carries at least an echo of Weber's sociological method' (pp. 8-9; cf. p. 22). See also Nicholson, *God and His People*, pp. 43-44 n. 51. The theory of holy war in von Rad is also widely criticized.

6. See Otto, *Max Webers Studien*, pp. 276-313, esp. 276. 'Three presuppositions that are central poles of Max Weber's conception in *Ancient Judaism*: early dating of confederacy between YHWH and His people, pre-national "confederacy" as the bearer of confederate ideal and covenant partner of YHWH, and "chosen strange god" YHWH in early Israel that is in the line of monolatry, are hard to hold today any more.' Conversely, Nicholson, *God and His People*, perceives Weber's contribution to highlight 'covenant'.

7. Weber's insights on Old Testament scholarship still have an impact on current study. Recently the impact of Weber's *Ancient Judaism* appeared fruitful in the field of law and ethics of the Old Testament. Cf. Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*

Thus the purpose of this article is not an examination of ancient Israelite history, but rather an analysis of one aspect of modern intellectual history in the early twentieth-century Germany, related to Weber's *Ancient Judaism*. We will pursue the theoretical framework or main structure of the work. I believe *The City*⁸ in *Economy and Society* will shed some light on the theoretical framework.⁹ A suggestion

(Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 35 states, 'His [Weber's] general approach is still an extremely profitable way into ethics in the Hebrew Bible, which is so obviously a collection of the religious ideals of a number of different religious groups within ancient Israelite society'. Philip F. Esler highly evaluates Weber's method while noting Weber's method is not related with 'social laws'. Philip F. Esler 'Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation', in *idem* (ed.), *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 3-14 (14). Moreover, Philip F. Esler and Anselm C. Hagedorn, 'Social-Scientific Analysis of the Old Testament: A Brief History and Overview' (in Esler, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 15-32 [29]) notes, 'Recently, however, closer attention has been paid to the socioeconomic development of Israelite society and how developments within a society affect the laws of that particular society. This is mostly done by references to archaeological evidence or by reversion to basic social-historical insights; however, we must note that the influence of Max Weber's sociology is currently making a comeback in the study of biblical law and ethics.' Even Otto admits to this. 'Intensive study on Max Weber's work for twenty-five years has influenced my hermeneutical work, especially concerning the texts of legal history in ancient Orient and the Old Testament', while strictly limiting conditions. Otto, *Max Webers Studien*, p. ix. David J. Chalcraft (ed.), *Sectarianism in Early Judaism: Sociological Advances* (London: Equinox, 2007) should be included as another example, but unfortunately, I have not been able to look at this work yet.

8. *The City* is in *Economy and Society* (eds. G. Roth and C. Wittich; Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1212-372. See also *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlass. Teilband 5: Die Stadt* (ed. W. Nippel; MWG, I/22-5; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1999). Concerning the idea of commensurability of *Ancient Judaism* and *The City*, I am indebted to Christa Schäfer-Lichternberger, *Stadt und Eidgenossenschaft im Alten Testament: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Max Webers Studie 'Das antike Judentum'* (Berlin; New York: W. de Gruyter, 1983). In the monograph, she deals with an early section of *Ancient Judaism* and analyses the concept of 'confederacy (*Eidgenossenschaft*)'. Cf. Christa Schäfer, 'Stadtstaat und Eidgenossenschaft: Max Webers Analyse der vorexilischen Gesellschaft', in W. Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Studie über das antike Judentum: Interpretation und Kritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 78-109. Generally, the concept of confederacy is no longer accepted as historical by Old Testament scholars.

9. Max Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (trans. R.I. Frank; London: NLB, 1976); *Zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Altertums: Schriften und Reden 1893-1908* (ed. J. Deininger; MWG I/6; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2006) has numerous elements that are related to the 'framework', though Weber seldom refers to the religious elements in the work. Cf. Otto, *Max Webers Studien*, pp. 15-16 n. 63. 'Surprisingly, M. Weber generally recognized little meaning in religious