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Max Weber’s Ancient Judaism is often seen as difficult or simply outdated.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 (Das antike Judentum) 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.

In Old Testament studies, Ancient Judaism is known to have influenced the leading scholars of the twentieth century, for example, Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad. 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 Though details of Ancient Judaism and its viability for the study of the Old Testament are outdated, the philosophical aspect of the work still remains.

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.


5. For example, the typological approach to the theory of ‘Holy War’ in von Rad. Cf. Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & 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* in *Economy and Society* will shed some light on the theoretical framework. 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 Weber 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.
