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The End of Biblical Studies: A New
Beginning for Afroasiatic Studies?

*Perspectives on Hector Avalos' The End of
Biblical Studies* (Prometheus Books, 2007)

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Preface

The author's remarks and review essays contained herein were prepared for the 2007 colloquium of the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern and Afroasiatic Cultural Research (IAACR), held on 17 November 2007 in San Diego CA. The purpose of that session was to explore the implications of Hector Avalos' *The End of Biblical Studies* for the future of research on the Bible (and cognate areas) and Afroasiatic languages and cultures.

The enclosed "perspectives" are responses to Avalos' work and continue the conversation that his important monograph has begun. Earlier versions of most were presented in San Diego and later edited for inclusion in this volume.¹

I wish to thank Professors Hector Avalos, Christopher Heard, Niels Peter Lemche, Alan Lenzi, Jeremy Schipper, and others who attended the colloquium and offered comments about the book and its central themes.

Hugh R. Page, Jr.
President, IAACR

¹ Christopher Heard was unable to attend and has graciously allowed inclusion of those comments he intended to share. My entry contains an expanded version of remarks made in my role as moderator of the session to "frame" the event and to stimulate conversation among participants. Their fundamental "thrust" centered on the idea that a reconfiguration of the discipline of Biblical Studies would serve further to position it as a non-hegemonic interlocutor in a cross-disciplinary conversation about the languages, cultures, and artifacts hailing from ancient Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Africa.

Author's Remarks

Hector Avalos,
Iowa State University

I would like to thank all the participants (Niels Peter Lemche, Alan Lenzi, Hugh Page, Jeremy Schipper,) who have taken the time to read and comment upon my book, *The End of Biblical Studies*. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Hugh Page, who has worked tirelessly to organize these sorts of intimate discussions among scholars.

The first item to note about my book is that the title is meant to be a double entendre: 1) in the sense of termination; 2) in the sense of the purpose of biblical studies.

In the case of the former, I do advocate the termination of biblical studies as it is currently practiced. In the case of the latter, I discuss the purpose of biblical studies, as currently practiced, as a religionist enterprise that has resulted in diverting attention to thousands of texts from the ancient Near East that deserve as much or more attention. Thus, I see biblical studies as part of a still ethnocentric and bibliolatrous academic community.

RELEVANCE AS A CENTRAL ISSUE

When one writes a controversial book, especially one advocating the termination of a particular academic *modus operandi*, there will be misunderstandings.

One of the most common misunderstandings is based on my notion that the Bible is irrelevant to the modern world. The usual response is that the Bible is used by millions of people, and so it cannot possibly be irrelevant.

However, such a response misunderstands what I mean by "irrelevant." "Irrelevant" here refers to a biblical concept or practice that is no longer

viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical. I used at least three lines of evidence for my claim of irrelevance as follows:

1. Statistics showing that the Bible, in some surveys, was not read at all in the last year by some 21.9% of Mainline Protestants and 33.1% of Catholics in America.
2. Statements by Christian scholars who indicate that the majority of the biblical text has little relevance to modern society (e.g., Dr. John Bright on the agricultural laws of Leviticus 25; Stendahl's view that only reinterpretation can maintain the relevance of the Bible).
3. The fact that readers of the Bible are harboring the illusion that they are reading "the Bible" rather than a book constructed and interpreted for them by elite scholars. To me, this is the single most important item missed by scholars who comment on my claim of irrelevance.

Some will respond that even if 33% of American Catholics are not reading the Bible, then some 67% are reading it, and so the Bible is mostly relevant. While this may be true, the fact remains that negative readership and positive readership are asymmetric categories.

That is to say, "not reading" the Bible is much more definitive and absolute than "reading" the Bible. "Reading" the Bible can have many levels of attention, while not reading the Bible has only one – zero.

Thus, to say that 67% of people are reading the Bible does not really mean it is relevant for 67% of people surveyed. For we know that even those that read the Bible focus on a very small portion of it and apply even less. That was what I tried to show with the study by Daniel J. Estes, the evangelical scholar, who focused on how modern Christians perceive a continuity between themselves and various Biblical texts. He concluded that the highest level of continuity (= applicability, to me) is relatively rare.

I do believe, though I have not proven it scientifically, that if we were to go verse by verse, I would suspect 99% of the Bible is not being applied at all in modern America. That is to say, only one out of every

100 verses would be seen as applicable. Try that with Leviticus 25 or all of Leviticus, for example, and you will see what I mean.

More importantly, those that are reading and applying the Bible are doing so under the impression that they are reading THE Bible instead of some book elite scholars have constructed. Were they told how much is really hypothetical reconstructed work of textual critics and translators, then this Bible might even be less of an authority than it is now.

In short, even those that read “the Bible” do so under a false illusion. They think they are reading something they are not (e.g., a document that can be verified to represent a reasonable copy of some original work or the word of God himself). That is not usually the case with most modern pieces of literature.

Overall, I have moved to a very constructionist view of “the Bible.” To me, such a unified book did not really exist in antiquity, meaning anywhere before definitive canonization by the Christian empire of Constantine. And even after that, there were still various notions of what “the Bible” was. To this day, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant “Bibles” are not exactly the same in terms of the books that they consider canonical.

And the people who decide what the Bible is usually are scholars or elite ecclesiastical officials. Scholars construct the biblical text (textual criticism), tell modern people what it means through translations and commentaries, and guide the agenda as to which portions are most worthy of study. Rarely are the decisions made by the lower echelons of believers.

Therefore, the Bible can be seen as the creation of scholars (ancient or modern), and today the power to define the Bible still resides mostly with ecclesiastical authorities and scholars, as well as with academic biblical scholars. Thus, even if believers hold the Bible to be relevant, it

is because scholars (ecclesiastical or academic) have promoted its relevance without divulging how much of it is constructed by scholars.

RELIGIONISM AND POSTSCRIPTURALISM

Another criticism is that my goal of moving society toward a postscriptural society is just as much religionism as that practiced by those that wish to keep the Bible relevant.

Here, I think we just have a different definition of “religionism.” To me, religionism relates to the idea that religion is essentially good and should be preserved. I define religion as a mode of life and thought premised on the existence of, and relationship with, supernatural forces and/or beings.

Contraposed to this definition is a Tillichian one that centers on “an ultimate concern.” Thus, having the ultimate goal of weaning people off the Bible would be “religious” by this definition.

The problem, of course, is that if we define “religious” in Paul Tillich’s manner, then one should be consistent and apply it to ALL goals in biblical studies. Thus, even if the goal is to have a faith-neutral approach, which I think is not possible with the Bible, it would be religionist by Tillich’s definition.

Faith-neutrality as a sort of ultimate goal would be pursued just as strongly and as ultimately as my goal, and so why is that not just as “religionist” as any other ultimate goal? I think it is, except the goal is to validate the canonical importance of the book under study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFROASIATIC STUDIES

In general, I think that bibliolatry has served Afroasiatic studies poorly. It is true that many Afroasiatic languages and cultures were first studied because of impulses related to explicating the Bible in its sociohistorical context.

However, the continued focus on studying what is relevant to the Bible still means that we have not allowed Afroasiatic cultures to be studied for their own merit (and despite some advances). Compare the number of biblical scholars to the number of Egyptologists and Assyriologists, and one will see a vast difference.

Some may object that all the major texts of Egypt or Mesopotamia have been studied, and what remains are thousands of texts that include trivial matters such as sheep inventories or grain deliveries. But, even those texts are important if we wish to reconstruct the economic life of ancient people. To expend thousands of person hours elucidating some obscure Joban text, while paying no attention to Mesopotamian sheep inventories, only highlights how scholars continue to decide what is important for modern audiences.

So, yes, I think modern scholars are caught in a self-perpetuating cycle. Scholars promote the relevance of the Bible, and then forget that it is only relevant because they keep promoting it as relevant. Were believers told by their clerics and scholars how much of a construct the Bible is, and how little we can reconstruct of any “original” text, then the Bible might cease to be relevant altogether.

My effort to end bibliolatry would also be the less self-interested option because it would not have my own employment as a ultimate goal, and it would allow thousands of other texts that have never even been given a voice to also speak about what possible wisdom, beauty, or lessons they might have. Indeed, thousands of Afroasiatic texts still lie untranslated.

So even those who believe that literature does matter should be advocating that we bring more literature to light that has not been previously read. That would be good for Afroasiatic studies.

Hector Avalos' *The End of Biblical Studies* – An Alternative View

Christopher Heard
Pepperdine University

I'd like to begin by thanking Hector Avalos for this book. *The End of Biblical Studies* is thought-provoking and stimulating, and the issues raised deserve quite a wide hearing. In the end, I cannot quite follow Hector down the course he charts in this book, but I do think that everyone in the biblical studies guild needs to grapple with the challenges Hector poses for us in its pages.

Those challenges proceed from two premises that undergird the entire book. As laid out on page 16, those premises are:

1. Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Bible is a product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of our world are no longer held to be relevant, even by most Christians and Jews.
2. Paradoxically, despite the recognition of such irrelevance, the profession of academic biblical studies still centers on maintaining the illusion of relevance by:
 - A. A variety of scholarly disciplines whose methods and conclusions are often philosophically flawed (e.g., translation, textual criticism, archaeology, history, and biblical theology).
 - B. An infrastructure that supports biblical studies (e.g., universities, a media-publishing complex, churches, and professional organizations).

Before we can really evaluate these premises, we need to know what Hector means by “irrelevant.” Fortunately, he is very clear on this point:

“‘Irrelevant’ here refers to a biblical concept or practice that is no longer viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical” (p. 17).

So are these premises *true*? With regard to premise 1, one can hardly

disagree that modern biblical scholarship has indeed revealed stark discontinuities between the cultures that produced the Bible and our own modern or postmodern culture. *However*, I think that Hector overstates the case for the remainder of premise 1. The rhetorical lumping together of “values and beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of our world” creates an assemblage so vague that it’s hard to actually analyze it and to evaluate the claim that Hector makes. For example, in order to support his claims of the Bible’s *de facto* irrelevance among modern American Christians, Hector cites polling data showing a lack of biblical literacy among self-identified Christians. One such datum comes from a study by Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, whose results, published in 2006, “showed that 21.9 percent of mainline Protestants and 33.1 percent of Catholics ‘never’ read Scripture” (p. 19). Hector’s figures are cited accurately, but are somewhat misleading in various ways. Taken together, Mainline Protestants and Catholics constituted only 43.3% of the entire respondent group. The subgroups problematically labeled by the Baylor researchers as Black Protestants and Evangelical Protestants together made up 38.6% of the respondents. Among *these* groups, 54.4% of Black Protestants and 42.1% of Evangelical Protestants reported reading the Bible at least once a week. It’s quite misleading to claim the *de facto* irrelevance of the Bible for two subgroups of respondents based on the responses of two *other* subgroups of respondents.

I’m spending a bit too much time on this, but let’s chase this down a little further. Can congruence between the “values and beliefs” of the cultures in which the Bible was produced with modern “values and beliefs” really be measured by biblical literacy tests or frequency of Bible reading? The oldest materials in the Christian Bible reached stable literary forms *no earlier* than about 700 BCE, and the youngest reached stable literary forms *no later* than about 150 CE. (I’m pushing the envelope on both ends to give as wide a range as possible.) In any

discrete era within that broad span, the number of fervent believers who “never” read scripture would undoubtedly be much higher than 33%! My point is that you can’t judge whether the “values and beliefs” of the Bible’s producers are shared by the Bible’s putative consumers by measuring Bible reading frequency or by testing biblical literacy tasks like putting five Old Testament stories in their narrative sequence. *A large majority of ancient Jews and Christians probably couldn’t do that either.* In the Baylor study, 95.1% of Black Protestants, 94.4% of Evangelical Protestants, 72.2% of Mainline Protestants, and 84.9% of Catholics affirmed that “Jesus is the son of God”—surely a *significant* congruence with the beliefs of the early Christians who produced the New Testament. 100% of Black Protestants, 86.5% of Evangelical Protestants, 63% of Mainline Protestants, and 74.8% of Catholics told the Baylor researchers they had “no doubt” that God exists—another remarkable overlap with the biblical author’s beliefs.

Now it is certainly true that at least some of the biblical writers held some values and beliefs that modern Jews and Christians do not *and should not* share. As far as we can tell, most of the biblical writers took slavery for granted, and some even endorsed it; most modern Christians don’t, and the rest shouldn’t. Most of the biblical writers presumed a sexist hierarchy of being in which males were inherently superior to females; many modern Christians don’t, and the rest shouldn’t. Some of the biblical writers cheerfully advocated genocide; most modern Christians don’t, and the rest shouldn’t. So, yes, there are *some* values and beliefs promulgated in the Bible that many modern Christians reject. But that does not mean that the Bible *as a whole* is irrelevant to those Christians. Even *within* the Bible, developments of this sort can be seen, and when modern Christians do reject *certain concepts* that can be found within the Bible, such as genocide, slavery, or sexism, they often do so precisely because they think those concepts are outweighed by *other concepts* from within the Bible, such as love of neighbor and love of

enemy.

So I would have to judge premise 1 only partially true. What about premise 2? Premise 2 is complex and has to be taken step by step. Let's start with 2a. Is it true that the various critical methods used in biblical scholarship are sometimes deeply flawed? Yes, and Hector does a good job of exposing some of those flaws. What about premise 2b? Is biblical studies supported by an institutional infrastructure? Yes, of course. But when we put 2a and 2b together, does that amount to the main body of premise 2, that the profession of academic biblical studies cynically maintains an illusion of relevance for the sake of its own self-preservation? Hector charges that "Biblical scholars, for example, are almost solely devoted to maintaining the cultural significance of the Bible not because any knowledge it provides is relevant to our world but because of the self-serving drive to protect the power position of the biblical studies profession" (p. 23).

As the primary wage-earner for my family of four, I can hardly deny that some self-interest enters into the equation of how I earn my daily bread. Nevertheless, as a religious, specifically Christian biblical scholar who has had conversations about Hector's book with my religious colleagues, I can state unequivocally that there are at least some biblical scholars who engage in this academic study because we really do think that the Bible has value and is an interesting and worthy subject for academic study. Hector labels this judgment "bibliolatry," but that's the strangest definition of "bibliolatry" that I've ever heard. By Hector's reasoning, my colleagues in the history department are "historiolatrous," those in the literature department are "Shakespeare-olatrous," and those in communication studies are, what, "rhetoricolatrous." Hector himself apparently does not consider the Bible to be valuable, and he's entitled to make that judgment for himself, but there are passages in the book (such as that I quoted earlier) that almost make me think Hector cannot conceive of anyone promoting the academic study of the Bible and the

relevance of the Bible from a sincere belief that such study is valuable either for religious reasons or for the sheer love of knowledge.

Ah, but the “sheer love of knowledge” is also something to which Hector objects. With minor changes, Hector’s premises could be turned against the study of *any* ancient civilization, be it Israelite-Judean, pre-Homeric, Celtic, Gallic, Mesoamerican, Indo-Aryan, Egyptian, sub-Saharan African, or what have you. By Hector’s logic, if the modern world (indeed, the modern *West*) does not, on the whole, share the beliefs and values of any given ancient culture, then studying that ancient culture can only be an elite leisure pursuit that exists for the purpose of gaining social power and propagating itself as an academic discipline. But I don’t agree with this assessment. Hector’s model seems to have no place in it for a “life of the mind,” for investigation of cultures and literatures *different from our own* out of human fellow-feeling or sheer curiosity. At points in Hector’s argument, it seems that no academic discipline can justify its existence to him unless that discipline can yield direct and immediate material benefits to specific human beings.

Hector’s diagnoses of problems in biblical studies methodology are, on the whole, sound (although I do have a few quibbles here and there). Has textual criticism shown us that the biblical manuscript tradition is a real mess? Yes. Have translators sometimes glossed over problematic language or texts in order to sell more Bibles? Yes. Have reconstructions of ancient Israelite history sometimes put forward wishful thinking, unwarranted speculation, and biblical paraphrase as if these were serious historical study? Yes. Have biblical aesthetes sometimes made silly claims about the biblical documents’ “beauty” over against other literatures? Yes. Has biblical theology often been arbitrary or incoherent? Yes. *But—it is precisely from within biblical studies that challenges to these missteps and failures have arisen.* Biblical studies, like all academic disciplines, has within itself the mechanism to correct its own course. Such course corrections are, obviously, sometimes *difficult* to achieve

because of entrenched interests. They are not *impossible* to achieve, however, and all of the criticisms that Hector brings to bear on biblical studies depend on using the data and methods of the biblical studies guild itself for internal self-criticism.

I haven't yet spoken to the issue of *religionism*, which looms so large in Hector's book. One can hardly attend an annual meeting of the SBL without realizing that many biblical scholars do what they do from religious motives. Hector applies charges of "religionism" as if acting from religious motives were self-evidently a bad thing. But as a religious person myself, I can't agree with that assessment. Hector argues that the Bible should not receive any special status or pride of place in the modern world. That is *not* a conclusion that any of his arguments in *The End of Biblical Studies* yields; rather, it is a programmatic claim driven by Hector's secular humanism. Hector considers "religionism" or acting from religious motives a bad thing ultimately because he considers religion a bad thing. This is the not-quite-unspoken premise behind the entire book.

So where do we go from here? Hector says there are only three alternatives:

1. Eliminate biblical studies completely from the modern world.
2. Retain biblical studies as is, but admit that it is a religionist enterprise.
3. Retain biblical studies, but redefine its purpose so that it is tasked with eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world.

Hector does not push for alternative 1. Since I don't think that "eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world" is a good thing, I can't endorse Hector's preferred option, number 3. But I don't think that means that I'm stuck with option 2. Instead, I would propose an option "2.5: Retain biblical studies, and admit that for most of its practitioners it is a religionist enterprise, but pursue it with rigorous *honesty* and *openness* in the presentation of its results."

Finally ... would the end of biblical studies mean a new beginning for

Afroasiatic studies? The stated topic of this colloquium is “whether de-privileging biblical studies within the academy might promote a deeper appreciation for the broad spectrum of Afroasiatic languages and literatures.” Hector seems to hint at something like this in both the introductory and concluding chapters. In the introduction, Hector writes:

Biblical studies should be geared toward helping humanity wean itself off the Bible and toward terminating its authority completely in the modern world. Focus then could shift to the still thousands of other ancient texts still untranslated and unread (p. 29).

And in the conclusion, he returns to this theme:

Mine would also be the less self-interested option because it would not have my own employment as an ultimate goal, and it would allow thousands of other texts that have not yet been given a voice to speak about the possible wisdom, beauty, and lessons they might contain. Indeed, thousands of Mesopotamian texts continue to lie untranslated. So even those who believe that literature does matter should be advocating that we bring to light more of the as-yet unread ancient texts (p. 341).

I simply do not think it would really work out this way. In the first place, if Hector thinks that biblical studies should end because it is *irrelevant*, it hardly seems consistent with that position to argue for an increase in the study of texts that are just as irrelevant by Hector’s definition, and even *more* irrelevant by the measures that Hector actually uses, such as daily reading and so on. Moreover, eliminating the influence of the Bible from the modern world, putting an end to biblical studies, does not seem likely to raise interest in untranslated texts from the ancient Near East; if anything, it seems likely to reduce such interest. Cf. Michael Jursa and the Nabu-sharrussu-ukin tablet (Jer. 39:3).

Is biblical studies at an end? I don’t think so. *Should* biblical studies be at an end? I don’t think so. Should biblical studies just continue with business as usual, without taking into account the criticisms of methodology and substance that Hector raises in this book? I don’t

think so. If biblical studies were to end, or shrink, would the study of other Afroasiatic literatures benefit? Am I glad that Hector wrote this book, given that I disagree with his fundamental premises and conclusions? — Absolutely.

Ten Notes about the Future of Biblical Studies

Niels Peter Lemche
University of Copenhagen

- 1) First I have to express my general agreement with the subject of Hector Avalos' book. There is not much if anything in it which I cannot endorse. An ordinary review of the book would for that reason be tedious and redundant. I would do nothing except scratch Avalos' back, expecting him to scratch mine. Avalos expresses a frustration with biblical studies shared by this author.
- 2) However, if we really propose to give up biblical studies as we know them, what will be the consequence? We will be ignored. Back in 2003, when Philip R. Davies and I were discussing a project: "Back to Reason," we soon discovered that it should really be called "Goodbye to reason," which reminds me of the former French minister of cultural affairs under Charles de Gaulle, the late André Malraux who once claimed that the 21st century will be a religious one. We are here in San Diego together with, say 8000 people all engaged in biblical studies as we know them. How many are present here today? 20 people (at the most)? If we shout: No more biblical studies! What would happen? We are living in an age more and more dominated by rather primitive religious sentiments, and the modern rivalry between Islam and Christianity does not help. On the contrary, when war is declared, as is the case of this religious conflict, reason evaporates.
- 3) What can we do, then? Let me mention the late James Barr's defense of historical-critical studies against Brevard Childs'

attack on historical-critical scholarship. Historical-critical scholarship liberated the Bible from the Church. Barr was far too optimistic: it has never really happened.²

- 4) This was, however, essentially the program of Johann Philip Gabler, famous for his claim from 1787 that biblical studies should be liberated from the control of dogmatic theology. His program consisted in the establishment of an independent biblical discipline.³ And for the next two hundred years critical scholars – mostly Protestant European ones – tried to carry out his program, realizing after 200 years that they have failed, and this is exactly what it is all about. If we take the program of historical-critical scholarship, it is from a scholarly point of view absolutely acceptable. However, it has for many years been a recurrent theme in my own scholarship that historical-critical scholarship was never historical or critical; it basically remained within the framework of the Church. It might be critical to a certain point but when questions like the historicity of Jesus pop up, then we see in earnest how “critical” historical-critical scholars really are (at least the Christian variety). A Jewish environment reacts in a similar way to the argument that there never was a Moses, or a David, and nobody can be in doubt about the reaction

² Barr’s criticism is included in his *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), pp. 401-38.

³ Johann Philip Gabler’s lecture, “An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective of Each,” originally in Latin, can be found in an English translation in Ben C. Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology. Flowering and Future* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, 1 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004).

among Muslims if we seriously questioned the historical existence of the prophet.

- 5) The status of the Bible and scholarship: In a lecture which I held at the SBL International Meeting in Edinburgh in the summer of 2006, I expressed the wish that religious people should not be allowed within 50 yards (or did I say 100 yards) of the Bible. I also stated that it was a mistake to translate the Bible and that it should have remained the possession of the clergy.⁴ Well, according to the numbers of people who really study the Bible presented by Hector Avalos in his new book, there is not much difference between the Medieval and the modern situation: Few read the Bible, even among the evangelicals. In Judaism the Rabbis read the Torah but little else, and the Torah is in many ways an absurd document with its many incomprehensible paragraphs. Evangelicals read and hear evangelical diatribes based on evangelical interpretation of the Bible, very much like the peasants of the Middle Age listened to the preaching of their priests on Sundays, explaining the Bible to them. So, maybe after all, not much has changed.
- 6) Now it is true that the Bible is to a large degree irrelevant to the modern situation. The church did not see it coming, or rather the Protestant Church did not see it (the Catholic Church is more or less indifferent because – in spite of the 2nd Vatican Council – the Bible here does not have any exclusive importance). It has happened over the last three or four generations. From that point there is less reason to

⁴ “Guns do not kill, people do!” In print in Roland Boer (ed.), *Secularism and Biblical Studies* (London: Equinox, 2008).

study the Bible than investing interest in, say the novels of Dostoyevsky, or in the work of Freud and his followers. From an esthetical point of view we will have to admit that there are fabulous passages in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament (compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament is rather dull and from a literary point of view insignificant), like selected parts of Isaiah, or some Psalms. However, since we live in an age dominated by the Olympic ideas of faster, higher etc., who can honestly argue that Shakespeare wrote poetry which is inferior to Isaiah's, or Goethe's (for those few who still read German), or Dante's (for Italian readers)? We might ask if the Russians will really give up, say Pushkin's poetry for the sake of biblical verse. If we look at the Bible as guidance for morality, it falls short, of course. In ancient times, Greek philosophers produced better and especially more coherent manuals of behavior. In modern times this has become increasingly evident: the Bible is not the best text book for ethical behavior, not even the anti-Jewish New Testament. On the contrary, it seems more adaptable as a guide to ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

7) Why not give up biblical studies? Because of its authority, because it has such a dominant place in the mind of most Christian people. It has never been liberated from the Church as argued by Barr. Lay people do not read the Bible. This is true, but they read and hear preaching based on a reading of the Bible. Because they never read the Bible, they have no chance of understanding what is wrong with that preaching. They are deliberately held in ignorance by the very people who should care about their education. If we say that biblical studies as we know them should end, it is because they have never done what there were expected to

do. Take again Gabler's program: Biblical scholars should study the Bible free from interference from the Church. Then, the results of such scholarship should be taken up by systematic theologians and presented to the lay members of the church. Gabler followed the program of the reformers, stressing the importance of the Bible. He, however, and that becomes clear when you read his famous lecture from 1787, is well aware of the limitations of the Bible as guidance for modern people, and simply says that Paul's ideas about the role of the women in church are in some ways outdated.

8) If we could change the position of the Bible within the church, we might say that the study of this book could be placed alongside, say the study of Gilgamesh, or the dialogues of Plato, or the dramas of Euripides. This might happen some day, but at the present I believe that the important thing is to establish more formally a group of scholars that claims no dependence on the church, and that simply maintains standards similar to the ones used in other scholarly fields. As it is, the standards of biblical scholarship are deplorable when it comes to even the basic logical structure of its discourse. This is not an easy task in light of the money put into the evangelical nonsense normally found in the news media. In the 1970s a British (true he was really from Iceland) researcher from the BBC, the late Magnus Magnusson (1929-2007), produced a splendid series about modern biblical scholarship including interviews, with among others, scholars like John Van Seters and Thomas Thompson. It was, as far as I am informed, never shown on television in the United States. Why? Again, only from what I have heard, an American evangelical tycoon bought the

- rights for the series and buried it in order that it should never be shown over here.⁵
- 9) However, newsmen live by news, and the news that a group devoted to secularized biblical studies in opposition to religiously dominated Bible readings will definitely attract the interest of the public – at least for five minutes. The core of such a group must be people with tenured positions. The craziness of the religious establishment in the United States, as evidenced by groups such as the Campus Watch, should not be disregarded. It must be made up of people whose academic status is beyond discussion, even though evangelicals will try to obstruct such a group vehemently.
- 10) Instead of giving up biblical studies, it is my suggestion that we begin to do biblical studies as they should have been carried out, now for more than 200 years. It is simply the duty of serious students of this important book – important not because of what it is, but because of what people think it is – to present an alternative to the so-called scholarly nonsense presented as biblical studies as we know them.

⁵ A book followed the series: *Archaeology of the Bible* (London: BBC, 1977).

A Response to Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*

Alan Lenzi
University of the Pacific

Is the field of Biblical Studies, its scholars, institutions, and media-publishing network maintained by religionist concerns? Hector Avalos believes it is, and I register a hardy amen. Given the contemporary religious significance of what we study, one could hardly expect it to be otherwise.

Hector, however, goes on to accuse biblical scholars of perpetuating the importance of Biblical Studies for purely selfish reasons – their own employment – despite the fact that the Bible and every sub-discipline within Biblical Studies are intellectually moribund or dishonest, irreparably tainted by religious concerns, totally irrelevant to modern life, and worthless for the improvement of humanity. Although I agree in principle that scholars must place their field under scrutiny from time to time and Hector therefore offers a potential service to us, I cannot agree with his thoroughly negative assessment.

Hector boldly concludes that the most responsible thing biblical scholars can do with their training is to *end* Biblical Studies *as presently practiced* and reorient the field so as to make the educating of people about the foreignness and irrelevance of the Bible their primary goal until lack of interest in the biblical text eventually carries the field into oblivion. In other words, all biblical scholars should be idealistic atheists like Hector with a Kevorkian approach to the field. I am an agnostic. I agree with Hector in principle that the best human future does not include scriptural guidance. I also agree that biblical scholars ought to make the complexities of Scripture known to students and the public, despite the theological or religious consequences. But, I am troubled by

Hector's absolutist approach that denies any positive role for Scripture among scholars.⁶

Rarely do we find a book so harshly critical of our field, our livelihood, and I dare say our collective intellectual integrity. Written by one of our own, the book may be seen by some as a professional betrayal of an angry scholar.

Furthermore, rarely do we find a book in Biblical Studies with as blatantly an atheistic orientation as Hector's. The book could be read as a guide to losing one's faith while studying the Bible – probably one of its goals. In a field that we all know is mostly populated by devotees of some biblically-informed or -influenced faith, the book goes explicitly against the grain and does so in terms too close to many biblical scholars' religious identity for comfort. Condemnation on religious grounds from some scholars, at least, is assured.

Now in the animal world, when a beast threatens the herd, instinct incites a reaction that will promote the chances of survival. Despite the fact that numerological study indicates the name "Hector Avalos" equals 666, and thus some may feel there is divine warrant to react against the Hector biblio-beast, I'm going to suggest we rise above our instincts, resist demonizing our colleague, and take one of the central accusations in the book to heart, namely, that Biblical Studies is inextricably enmeshed with religionist concerns. Despite problems with this book, if it gets us to start explicitly talking about this issue as a field, not as a

⁶ Most of my professional interests are historical in nature with little concern for making a direct connection between the content of my study and contemporary or theological issues. (Developing pedagogical tools for teaching is one exception. But see also just below.) Call me an elitist, but I happen to think that even the most obscure cul-de-sacs of Humanities – has anyone ever heard of Assyriology? – have a place in human civilization. I also believe, however, that part of my job as a biblical scholar, especially in the classroom and to some extent in the public sphere, is to challenge facile, uncritical, or oppressive understandings of Scripture. If that means rocking a theological boat or challenging my colleagues, then so be it. (This is the other exception to my propensity for historicism.) In principle, then, I agree with Hector calling our field to account. I just do not agree with most of his assessments or ultimate recommendation.

group of people with various metaphysical beliefs but as a premier learned society that should hold its members to the highest scholarly ideals, then it will have served a purpose.

Before elaborating on this, however, I want to point out three serious problems with *The End of Biblical Studies* that I am afraid will deter biblical scholars from seriously reflecting upon this one point that I think the book highlights.⁷

1. Hector has failed to deliver his message to its proper audience, biblical scholars, and thereby weakened the effectiveness of his book.

Given its stated purpose, there is a fundamental problem with the book's implied audience. Is Hector addressing scholars and their institutional/media publishing support base, the very people he most needs to convince to end, that is, to change Biblical Studies? If so, the book belabors points about the Bible that are common knowledge among this crowd. For example, are scholars really unaware that translations contain theological biases, especially ones related to relevancy? It is right, I think, to call attention to the issue of intellectual honesty, the need to eschew theological bias, and the problem of paternalism in translations, but this chapter is not writing to encourage self-awareness in scholars. Ending with the words "(m)istranslation is . . . often the goal of all biblical translations" (58),⁸ the chapter incites a near paranoid-level of distrust not only of biblical translations but of biblical scholars. I think this is misrepresentation and some might suggest

⁷ There are a number of details of interpretation in this book that a reviewer might dispute. But as there is no new biblical research, I feel no need to pick at these details. The book is an argument that draws on what is already known in order to establish the need for a tectonic shift within the field. My response is focused on that broader goal of the book.

⁸ It may be more appropriate to say that mistranslation, for a variety of reasons, is often the case or a problem in many biblical translations. Perhaps I am naïve, but Hector's statement sounds too conspiratorial and too monolithic.

border-line collective libel. Also, Hector takes several pages in most chapters to rehearse basics about each sub-discipline – do we need a lesson in textual criticism? – and frequently peppers the text with statements that are superfluous to scholarly readers, even to the point of annoyance. For example, do scholars need to be informed that Michael Coogan is “a (widely) respected biblical scholar” (17, 258) and Frank Moore Cross “is one of the most prominent biblical scholars alive” (228). Clearly, biblical scholars are not the primary implied audience in the text, even though, as our meeting at the colloquium and a number of biblio-blogs indicate, the book is most obviously relevant to scholars in the field. Given its stated goal, the book *should have been* written directly to scholars and published by a scholarly press. The fact that it wasn’t is one of the book’s great mistakes.

Is Hector addressing the interested lay person, then? Given the fact that he has published the book with Prometheus Books, a strongly atheistic publishing house, one can hardly believe he is writing for a religionist audience, a group of people, according to him, that most need convincing of the Bible’s irrelevancy.⁹ Even if the book does provide persuasive reasons for abandoning biblically-based faith, how many people holding such faith will buy it for themselves? And how many of those who somehow come into possession of the book will get beyond the brash Introduction before setting it aside?

What about secular lay readers? Might they be the book’s implied audience? This is probably the best bet, but is there really much of a market for this book among interested lay readers who have *no* biblically-based faith but sufficient interest in Biblical Studies as a field to care about its future direction? If Hector is writing the book to them, it seems that he is undermining his own goal of helping the field fade away

⁹ Hector’s statements about the Bible’s irrelevance for believers today understates just how many contemporary individuals still read the Bible for guidance. See Christopher Heard’s comments on this topic.

into obscurity by preaching to the converted. Why bring up the Bible at all to such an audience? I suspect therefore that the book is actually aimed at a subset of secular readers, namely, apostate Christian atheists who would relish a thorough articulation of why the Bible and its scholarship are irrelevant nowadays. This explains not only the anti-Bible but also anti-religion stance throughout the book. The fact that atheistic blogs like infidelguy.com are featuring interviews with Hector speaks reams.

I don't have a problem with biblical scholars writing books for atheists. But, for a book that wants to reform our profession, one wonders why he has chosen to write to such a niche audience and not more directly to us, his colleagues, those of us standing accused.¹⁰

2. The take-no-prisoners tone of this book and its impoverished view of the role of scholarship in society, though implied only, make it very difficult to read the book as a serious attempt to change Biblical Studies as a field. It certainly does not reach out to biblical scholars to change their ways.

I think the ubiquitous use of the words "end" and "irrelevant" promotes an inflammatory style throughout the book,¹¹ implies a

¹⁰ Hector has objected to my audience analysis, asserting that the book was written for scholars, and even citing the many technical details in the book that only a scholar would understand. True enough. But this objection only confirms how clouded the implied audience really is. See also my second point below.

¹¹ The accusation that biblical scholars are guilty of "bibliolatry," a disparaging comment used throughout the book, is another example of over-the-top inflammatory rhetoric. Although it is sophomoric, I have to point out that Hector's use of this term, ironically, actually affirms the fact that the Bible continues to be a relevant source for generating linguistic expressions (one must assume the biblical notion that idolatry is bad in order for the term to have its full, derogatory semantic effect). Thus, his use of it aides and abets the Bible's continued influence on our linguistic repertoire. If Biblical Studies is going to end, such phrases should be excised from common usage, especially among scholars, lest such phrases incite a curiosity into their origin.

utopian or naïve conception of scholarship generally that Hector cannot possibly really mean (it undermines his own book!), and, most importantly, hides what is at the heart of Hector's project. Concerning the last of these, what Hector *really* wants to end is biblical authority's hold over humanity, as the conclusion makes quite clear (342). Biblical Studies, which he thinks currently aides and abets biblical authority, must change as a field in order to accomplish that goal.¹² So why talk about the *end of Biblical Studies* at all? Why not call the book *The Brave New Future of Biblical Studies* instead? Furthermore, why advocate such an extreme idealistic position, or rather, imposition, when rejection is assured by nearly all biblical scholars with a religious commitment – who are fully within their religious freedom to study the good book? It's simply inflammatory.

As for irrelevance, Hector defines the word explicitly in terms of a modern value judgment, that is, he deems “a biblical concept or practice that is no longer viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical” as irrelevant. This again is clearly linked to Hector's project against biblical authority since he thinks the entire Bible is irrelevant in this sense. But obviously one can maintain that the content of a text or anything that one might study under the umbrella of the Humanities is out-dated or inhumane or even evil while at the same time insisting that its study as a human cultural artifact has something to teach us about human creativity, barbarity, gullibility, or stupidity. So his concern about ethical irrelevance seems, well, irrelevant.

But Hector also loosens his notion of “irrelevance” at times to condemn Biblical Studies as an elite leisurely pursuit – a socio-economic judgment that does not ring true with my personal experience so far. Useless in the alleviation of human suffering and guilty of foisting a self-

¹² Even if Hector's idea were somehow enforced or effected, biblical scholars may rest assured, like Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:19), that the extinction event does not lie within their own generation.

serving, implicitly hegemonic agenda on those who will *or must* listen (those poor college students trapped in my classroom!), Hector believes biblical scholars offer no positive practical benefits for humanity (see 321 for a particularly strong statement). Whether or not Hector would actually extend this kind of accusation to other scholars in the Humanities is moot for our purposes here.¹³ Moreover, we need not labor the obvious point that scholars offer a democratic society a number of very important services, ranging from appreciation of our common humanity to trenchant criticism of social ills.¹⁴ Let us remain focused on what Hector does say. Offering a preemptive rebuttal to the charge of anti-intellectualism (24) and denying a Marxist agenda (23), Hector does not in fact reject all of Biblical Studies—despite its roots in religionism; rather, he damns *present day* biblical scholars as practicing “false intellectualism and intellectual dishonesty” because they are protecting instead of exposing the Bible and the theologically troubling implications of biblical scholarship. They are caretakers, not critics.¹⁵ The field by and large promotes, he asserts, a religionist agenda instead of a truly critical perspective. Moreover, as all the important discoveries have been made, Hector claims scholars are now mainly just going

¹³ The claim that Biblical Studies is detracting from the study of thousands of other ancient texts currently suffering from scholarly neglect (24, 29, 341) would seem to count against this view. What is somewhat humorous about this example, of course, is that many of these texts, as the catalogs indicate, are rather mundane economic documents that most people, including the few scholars studying them, would deem irrelevant to the problems or concerns of the modern world.

¹⁴ I find the constant berating of scholarship as an elite leisurely pursuit and part of a hegemonic apparatus as facile at best or utopian at worst. Hector admits that all views are hegemonic at their base. I agree. But, I think scholars and artists tend to be the people most self-aware and critical of how accepted views feed a dominant hegemony. Thus, despite scholars being part of the creation of, say, a form of cultural hegemony, they are also often among its most vocal critics. See below.

¹⁵ Here I am adapting the title of Russell McCutcheon’s book *Critics not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001).

through the motions of scholarship to maintain the status quo.¹⁶ Thus, there is good reason to pay special attention to the Biblical Studies brand of uselessness within the Humanities and bring it to an end. As he would say, we brought it upon ourselves; we just won't admit it. Even if one partially agrees with Hector that there are some problems in the field, some dead weight – and we will all judge that differently in terms of both people, content, and practices, of course, Hector's conclusion that there is nothing new to be learned and that the field has duplicitous motives is overstated.

Despite their attempt to be self-critical, scholars are not above the inevitable influence of the on-going give-and-take that is social formation. But just as some scholars allow cultural (in which I include “religious”) influences to shape their scholarship uncritically, other scholars are among the first people to call attention to this. With regard to fields of knowledge, it is often the case that the most ardent critics of a specialized field of knowledge come from within the very same field being criticized (as even Hector shows, 22–23). In this sense, I'd say Hector's work, although clearly over-blown, provides an opportunity for us to reflect on how and why Biblical Studies conducts itself in the fashion that it does. He has derided us publicly and inappropriately, in my opinion, and he counsels death rather than convalescence, but we might still learn something from him, especially, in my opinion, about our scholarly field's relationship to contemporary religion.

¹⁶ Did the critical method not affect theological syntheses of the 20th century? And more recently, have not the revisions to Pauline theology challenged Protestant theological understandings of justification by faith, first formulated during the Reformation? Even within faith communities, then, Biblical Studies has had an impact. Many within the more conservative denominations do their best to ignore the implications of such studies – often to no avail. Scholars are the ones who both create the theological crises and attempt to come up with new formulations that solve the very problems they create. Hector only focuses on the latter, apologetic function.

3. It is no surprise to biblical scholars that every sub-discipline of Biblical Studies has been touched or shaped by religious concerns in some way. But why does Hector choose a fellow secular humanist's work as evidence of this tendency in the field in the longest chapter of the book?

I am referring to the chapter on archaeology and history. Sections of the chapter contain useful inter-disciplinary perspectives on some issues that I thoroughly enjoyed. For example, Hector looks briefly at the epistemological foundations of historiographical claims, reviewing the ideas of Keith Windschuttle through a case study in the historiography of Augustus Caesar's death. He also makes an interesting appeal to Arthurian historiography as a means to gain some perspective on biblical historiography. We could all learn something by occasionally reflecting on and re-assessing the philosophical basis for what we do and by looking at how other, related fields do what they do. But this inter-disciplinary material is embedded in a chapter dedicated to a sustained critique of one particular scholar, William Dever, which does not seem to fit comfortably into the broader agenda of the book.

In essence Hector holds Dever to a very high standard of what constitutes "knowledge" and claims Dever's archaeological analyses, while inveighing against minimalists and their postmodernism, are not much different than the minimalists themselves. Rejecting its postmodernist assumptions, minimalism, according to Hector, is the only rational position with regard to biblical history.

There's nothing wrong in principle with this conclusion, in my opinion, even if one may disagree with the details. But why this whole chapter is so fixated on tearing down Dever was quite puzzling to me as I read it. Hector quotes Dever himself at the beginning of the chapter to the effect that biblical archaeology, that is, archaeology that exists in order to support or prove the historicity of the Bible, is essentially dead (109).

Moreover, Hector reports up front that Dever holds very little of the Bible as historically accurate and describes Dever as a secular humanist without a religionist agenda (III). So, again, I am puzzled about how this chapter contributes to establishing the irrelevance of a “biblical archaeology” that has already been redefined (and still being practiced!) or proves “biblical archaeology” has a religionist agenda.¹⁷

Of course there are people who still use archaeology as an apologetic tool and thus have a strong religionist motivation (just as there are scholars using translations, literary studies, and textual criticism for the same purpose).¹⁸ But why not go after them instead of Dever? Other chapters in the book show no shortage of examples, especially from Fundamentalists and Evangelicals.

I hardly need say that the conversation between Hector and Dever throughout the chapter shows how archaeology could undermine biblical authority as conceived by, say, an Evangelical Christian. So it is easy to see what the chapter contributes to that part of his agenda. Also, Hector is correct, as Dever knew a long time ago, that many of the best supporters for Syro-Palestinian or “biblical archaeology” are religionists.¹⁹ Finally, maximalists, a good number of whom are religionists, see Dever as an ally in their fight with the minimalists. So one might think undermining the position of the best representative of a group (Dever) to erode ideas of an associated group (religious

¹⁷ Hector has objected that a re-assessment of Dever is overdue and that several of the scholars building on his ideas have also gone unanswered. So the chapter, he states, is filling a gap in the literature. I do not doubt this. Nevertheless, the chapter does not sit well within the book as a whole.

¹⁸ I must interject here that Hector’s analysis of literary studies of the Bible, though not without problems, is absolutely correct with regard to the apologetic interests of *many* of its practitioners. When I was in seminary (1993–97), literary studies of the Bible were the rage. Such studies consciously eschewed the problematic historical aspects of the text – I was *never* introduced in class to the standard source critical approach to the Pentateuch – and focused on the inherent beauty and complexity of the biblical materials.

¹⁹ See 328–331 for Hector’s discussion of *Biblical Archaeology Review* and its subscriber base, which is comprised of mostly Bible-believing Christians.

maximalists) is a good strategy. But it is a *non sequitur*. Even if Dever believes that his profession is dependent for its funding on Bible believers²⁰ and maintains that some of the biblical narrative finds a connection to archaeology (Hector does too!), pointing out problems in an atheistic archaeologist's reconstruction of ancient Israel hardly provides solid evidence for Hector's charge that professional, high-level archaeology of the biblical lands is permeated with religionism.²¹ One gets the impression that Hector is playing the hero here, engaging in an intellectual gladiatorial battle with his former master to prove his superiority – something he has criticized other scholars for doing (315).

It is only in the summary and conclusion of this chapter that Hector makes the religionism connection, and the connection is superficial at best.²² Citing a young archaeologist's plea for new approaches to integrating archaeology with the Bible, whose work is published in a very conservative archaeological publication edited by Hoffmeier and Millard,²³ Hector in essence says, See, here's evidence of just how desperate biblical archaeology is to make itself relevant to religionists.

²⁰ Need we accuse Assyriology of religionism because some scholars have accepted funding from Assyrian Christians? Anyone who knows that field will get a good laugh out of that idea.

²¹ Hector writes about the illegitimacy of psychoanalyzing ancient scribes for text critical purposes (92), and he decries the poor state of a field that “cannot settle arguments by much beyond psychoanalysis of opponents” (127), and then goes on to tell us on the same page that the self-avowed atheist Bill Dever constructs his idea of ancient Israel “on the basis of his own social history,” which seems to be an implicit assertion that Dever's Christian past continues to affect his archaeological work. Now who's psychoanalyzing?

²² I am aware that there is some mention of religionism in connection with forged artifacts (145), but it is not substantive enough to connect the chapter to the broader themes of the book.

²³ See 184, n.263, which gives the bibliographical information as: Andrew G. Vaughn, “Can We Write a History of Israel Today?” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 385. For a review of the entire volume, which also highlights its conservative tendencies, see http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4521_4582.pdf, accessed on November 21, 2007.

What does this really have to do with Dever? Why not take on Hoffmeier and Millard or the quoted archaeologist, instead?

This whole chapter suggests Hector is on a campaign to purge even his own “team” (secularists) of any tendencies to utilize the Bible in a positive fashion. This radical revolutionary-style stance is overly rigid, alienating, and unfortunate for those of us who would like to see change in the profession.

There are other points that one might address, but I think I have done enough criticism. I’d like now to consider what Hector can teach us. In order to do so, let us consider an explicitly reader-centered approach to interpreting Hector’s book. Instead of reading the book as Hector intends us to, as an absolute demand to change the discipline, let us consider it as protest literature that impractically demands a mile in the hopes of gaining an inch. Herein lies the pedagogical value of *The End of Biblical Studies*.

It is clear that Biblical Studies can be influenced by contemporary religion. But a ban on religion among biblical scholars is impractical, as if that could happen (!), and inappropriate. But we can demand a rigorous and unrelenting self-critical stance for all of us wishing to be called a scholar rather than, e.g., minister, adherent, proselytizer, or profiteer of religious trivia and paraphernalia. We can also take steps to insure that the Society of Biblical Literature disassociates itself officially from such religious insider concerns.

Unlike almost every other field in the humanistic academy, Biblical Studies is viewed as a religious, theological, apologetic, and broadly sectarian pursuit. It’s obvious why this is: despite our liberal and critical leanings, Biblical Studies is still dominated by scholars, schools, and publishers who are or serve adherents of a religion somehow based on the book we all study. Moreover, many of the students that enter our classroom do so for religious reasons. We all know this; and nearly all of us believe religious biblical scholars have every right to serve their

religious communities. But I think it is time (again?) to consider what this means for the Society of Biblical Literature, the umbrella organization for biblical scholars and the field's premier learned society.

How do we define our collective goals and create guidelines *as a learned society* so that we can all participate in the Society without allowing religious views to shape our collective identity as a learned society, without losing credibility among other ACLS societies, and without completely alienating ourselves from our colleagues in other departments? This last point is very important to me as a scholar at a secular institution.

I have a suggestion: I think the Society must be more restrictive about its definition of membership, and the Society should define its activities as an explicitly intellectual, humanistic enterprise.

Concerning membership, we might take a lesson from other Biblical Studies societies in America. The Catholic Biblical Association, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the Institute for Biblical Research are examples that come easily to mind. Active members in the CBA must possess an advanced degree in the field and obtain a current member's recommendation; a committee examines and votes on each application before the applicant is granted membership.²⁴ The ETS requires its members to possess a Th.M. or higher and requires assent to a statement of faith.²⁵ The IBR requires applicants to have a doctoral degree along with two letters of support before granting membership.²⁶ What does the SBL require for full membership? \$65.²⁷ The problem this

²⁴ See <http://cba.cua.edu/becomeamember.cfm>, accessed on November 10, 2007.

²⁵ See <http://www.etsjets.org/?q=faq>, accessed on November 10, 2007. One might compare the even stricter requirements for admission into the Evangelical Textual Criticism blog (<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/>, accessed on November 11, 2007).

²⁶ See http://www.ibr-bbr.org/IBR_Membership.aspx, accessed on November 10, 2007.

²⁷ <http://sbl-site.org/JoinSBLToday.aspx>, accessed on November 10, 2007.

creates is most evident, in my experience, at the regional meetings where I have witnessed pastors or, in one case, a woman who had had a visionary experience share their thoughts about the Bible or god or religion. Is the SBL the appropriate venue for this kind of report?

Full membership in the SBL should be restricted to people with an academic doctoral degree from an accredited program. Student membership should be restricted to academic doctoral students. We should make it harder to join instead of easier. Furthermore, given the function of what we study for contemporary religion and the fact the membership in a learned society can give credibility to one's status in the field, it does not seem unreasonable to inform potential applicants for membership about the Society's orientation to academic Biblical Studies. Namely, the application should make it clear that all members of the Society engage the Bible as a product of and influence on human culture. By joining, members implicitly agree in principle to the practice of using the same critical faculties and exercising the same kinds of judgments on the Bible as one might use on, say, an Assyrian royal inscription or a non-canonical gospel. In other words, it should be clear that members of the SBL do not privilege the Bible with a special mode of inquiry.²⁸

²⁸ I am not the only person to call for a clearer statement about what the Society stands for. Note the words of James A. Sanders, former president of SBL:

“How should we address the issue of granting membership and Enlightenment respectability to those who are expected by their institutions to teach non-critical and un-critical theories about the Bible, its origins and development? I would be loathe to have litmus tests of any sort, but would it not be appropriate for the SBL, in terms of its charter, origins, and corporate integrity, to state clearly for all the public to know that we are an enlightenment society sponsoring critical methods of study of the Bible for those who openly subscribe to our mission and to the purposes for which it was founded? All who know me know that I am not one ‘to rock the boat,’ but it does seem to me that a society like ours needs to have clear standards of integrity as a condition of membership” (<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=670>, accessed on November 11, 2007).

What I am proposing may be construed as a litmus test, but given the SBL's origins, as Sanders points out, I think it is merely an explicit affirmation of the core Enlightenment values of the Society.

I am not saying that people in Biblical Studies with a religious commitment are not scholars. That is obviously ridiculous. I am saying, however, that whatever else one might think the Bible is, we can all agree that it is manifestly a human document and therefore that it is most appropriately engaged in a humanistic manner in a learned society like the SBL.

This suggestion does not rid the field of religionism, as Hector wants to do. I do not think that is a legitimate goal for the Society. Nor does it deny a place for religious scholars in Biblical Studies generally. My suggestion will, however, set a more explicit and humanistic standard of expectation for scholars who wish to be affiliated with the SBL and thereby disassociate the members of the Society from a religionist agenda, even if they have one personally. Biblical scholars will then be better situated to fulfill their role in a pluralistic society as knowledge specialists, those best trained to inform and challenge others about biblical literature. I think this is a step in the right direction that even Hector will appreciate.

A Brief Reflection on Hector Avalos' *The End of Biblical Studies*

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I would like to begin by thanking Hugh Page for inviting me to participate in this very exciting discussion and Hector Avalos for providing us with his very stimulating work. The book, *The End of Biblical Studies* has given me much more to think about than I can possibly cover in eight to ten minutes. Thus, I will aim to continue our discussion by focusing on this book's relationship to certain currents within the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). I suppose the impending split between the SBL and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) has got me thinking about who serve as conversation partners for biblical scholars.

Since Avalos's book had a section on the early SBL presidents, I thought it would interesting to place his work in conversation with the most recent SBL presidential address – although I do realize that a presidential address is being delivered even as I speak. I will suggest that both Avalos's work and Robert Kraft's 2006 SBL presidential address call us to think about what the word "biblical" means in the title "Society of Biblical Literature" and thus the nature and scope of biblical studies. Such a concern becomes even more pressing considering next year's split with the AAR and how that action may cause us to think through the nature of biblical studies.

I. *The "Biblical" in the "Society of Biblical Literature"*

Avalos's brief essay on the Society of Biblical Literature's website in May of 2006 served as a summary of the argument in his book.²⁹ This

²⁹ Hector Avalos, "The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession" <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=520> (accessed 24 November 2007).

essay brought a great deal of attention to his ideas as well as a number of attacks in the form of response letters. Some writers wondered why he continues to be a member of the SBL, especially since Avalos writes in his book, “Biblical studies should be geared toward helping humanity wean itself off of the Bible and toward terminating its authority completely in the modern world. Focus then could shift to the still thousands of other ancient texts still untranslated and unread.”³⁰

Elsewhere in his book, he writes “the Bible has been studied far longer than any other text. So why invest any more time in this text when there are so many others that have yet to be studied? If the Bible is kept because of its supposed moral lessons, then why not allow that the many ancient texts that are still unknown to the modern world might also have worthy lessons?”³¹ One letter responds to Hector’s concern about “bibliolatry” by writing, “I can't believe he is leveling this protest against the Society of BIBLICAL Literature. Let's repeat again: BIBLICAL literature. You become a member of the SBL because you are interested in the BIBLE, not Mayan or Hindu or Afrikaans or other literature. How can he blame a professional society for focusing solely on its professed subject?”³² This response letter suggests that the term “biblical literature” in the “Society of Biblical Literature” means the literature contained within the Bible.

One may contrast this letter’s sentiment about the goals of the SBL with Robert Kraft’s 2006 SBL presidential address entitled, “Para-mania: Beside, Before and Beyond Bible Studies.”³³ In a tongue in cheek

³⁰ Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

³² J.D. Walters, “SBL: The Root of All Evil?”

http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2007_05_01_archive.html (accessed 24 November 2007).

³³ Robert Kraft, “Para-mania: Beside, Before and Beyond Bible Studies” *JBL* 126.1 (2007): 5-27. Kraft cites Avalos’s essay “The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession,” which was available at the

manner, Kraft sought to justify his own presidency of the SBL despite the fact that he does not see himself as a Hebrew Bible or New Testament scholar and his work has shown little engagement with the Bible. Kraft defended himself by noting that the early presidents of the society frequently included “archeologists and students of the ancient Near East of various shades, and more occasionally those whose ‘Bible studies’ credentials were also relatively secondary.”³⁴ Kraft argues that these early presidents often identified the “biblical literature” in the title SBL not as simply the literature contained in the Bible but as literature that is “something like,” “similar to,” or “defined in relation to” the Bible. Kraft writes,

If ‘biblical’ means focusing only or primarily on canonical scriptures... I cannot claim to be a biblical scholar... [Yet], as it turns out, both in terms of the history of the SBL and its current programs, I have little reason to be concerned about being marginal or marginalized. ‘Biblical’ studies today, in the contemporary SBL environment, teems with what I’m classifying as ‘para-scriptural’ interests in the broadest senses.³⁵

In his address, Kraft calls for attention to the “para-scriptural,” which consists of “that large body of material (both text and tradition, as well as artwork and stones and buildings) that was respected and taken seriously by the people and cultures we study.”³⁶

He concludes last year’s SBL presidential address by noting that, “Descriptively speaking, we are, and have been from the outset, a Society of Literatures and Traditions and Realia pertaining to the ancient worlds from which Judaism and Christianity emerged and developed throughout late antiquity – not simply “Bible studies” but ‘biblical’ studies.”³⁷ If one

time of his presidential address (“Para-mania,” 6, n. 6). He refers to it as a “severe critique of the SBL,” but does not engage this essay further.

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

applies Kraft's distinction between "Bible studies" and "biblical studies" to Avalos's book, then one could say that Avalos is not calling so much for the end of biblical studies. Rather, he is calling for the end of Bible studies. If this is the case, I think his book is actually contributing to a scholarly concern that is important to the future of the field – at least a concern that seems important enough for Kraft to focus his presidential address on it.

To be sure, Kraft seems more concerned with the methodological dangers of focusing on the Bible than with potential social dangers of holding up certain ancient texts as authoritative scripture, as Avalos is. Nonetheless, both scholars call for a greater historical contextualization of the material within the Bible and, at least for Avalos, for more transparency about the implications of this historical contextualization. This would provide a more intentional place for biblical studies as an historical or more specifically a new historical discipline.³⁸

What would it mean to frame biblical studies more intentionally as a new historical endeavor that examines the dynamic relationship between writers, texts, and the cultures to which they belong? Would this move promote greater interest in afroasiatic cultural studies? I suppose that if one does not study the Bible because of its authoritative nature, it would be more methodologically rigorous to study the Bible as one text among many within the ancient afroasiatic world. In that sense, greater attention to the wealth of "para-scriptural" material, to use Kraft's term, that ancient afroasiatic cultures could provide would enhance biblical studies.

³⁸ For more on Avalos's approach as a "new historical" approach, see Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, "Introduction," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; Semeia Studies 55; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 5.

II. *Conclusions*

One of the response letters to Avalos's essay of the SBL web site claimed that it shows, "the utter disconnect and irrelevance of the author."³⁹ I mention Kraft's recent presidential address to suggest that Avalos' concern about the trends that he sees in SBL do not support this claim. To the contrary, Avalos' concerns share points in common with the programmatic address of a recent SBL president himself. I have brought Avalos' work into conversation with Kraft's address in order to illustrate that Avalos is not the only one concerned with what exactly is "biblical" in the "Society of Biblical Literature." Nor is his call for greater attention to other ancient texts all that idiosyncratic. Rather, this concern connects him with fellow scholars as they are calling us to reflect on a very relevant set of issues.

³⁹ Kim Paffenroth, "Reply to Dr. Avalos" <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=530> (accessed 24 November 2007).

Recalibrating Biblical Studies for Post-Hegemonic Discourse – A Few Thoughts on Hector Avalos’ *The End of Biblical Studies*

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Given the origins and focus of the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern and Afroasiatic Cultural Research (IAACR), it was a pleasure to devote its 2007 colloquium to a review of Avalos’ *The End of Biblical Studies*. I established IAACR in 1989. It was born amid the angst accompanying dissertation writing and the transition from life as graduate student to that of fully credentialed citizen of the academy. This was a time when I wrestled mightily with meta-questions about disciplinary boundaries, research methodology, and the aims of pedagogy. I also wondered about job prospects, publishing, and long-term employability. The memory of conversations with colleagues and friends – like Hector – in library lounges and coffee shops, and the belief that unusual paradigms can frame interesting and productive intellectual exchanges, led to the conception of this Institute.

IAACR has been, from the outset, small, nimble, and intentionally *marginal*. Over the years, its annual gatherings have proven to be congenial settings for the discussion – among small groups of scholars – of issues surrounding Afroasiatic languages, cultures, and texts. These conversations have produced two interesting outcomes. The first is a re-conceptualization of the Bible and a host of other ancient Near Eastern texts as *realia* emerging from an Afroasiatic *milieu*. The second is a general consensus that the sampling universe for linguistic and cultural comparison of the aforementioned artifacts must be inclusive of the full geographical and historical expanse of the Afrasian *phylum*.

Avalos’ observation that privileging the study of the Bible lessens the extent to which texts in other languages receive scholarly "attention" is

an intriguing one (24, 341). Insofar as the Masoretic Text (MT) of the Hebrew Bible includes books written in both Hebrew and Aramaic, and given that the first language of Jesus and many of his early followers was Aramaic, one could argue that a single corpus of Afroasiatic traditions (all Semitic) has received disproportionate scholarly attention, in comparison to that given to Cushitic, Egyptian, Chadic, Berber, or Omotic languages and texts. Problematizing the Bible's status, and querying the attitudes and institutions that undergird it, are appropriate tasks for both the discipline of Biblical Studies and an Institute such as IAACR.

In keeping with the spirit of prior forums and publications, my goal is to treat *The End of Biblical Studies* as an interlocutor and to offer a few reflections on several of the issues its author raises. My initial reading suggests that the book encourages us, at the very least, to recalibrate the discipline whose discontinuance in its current form (339) he advocates, and to nuance that field's, at times hegemonic, undertones.

First, I too have shared Avalos' chagrin at how little biblical research, that shared within the context of Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meetings, and that available in various publications, is aimed *specifically* at improving the day-to-day lives of ordinary "folk" (27). This is clearly one of the dangers inherent in academic life. The issues most Bible scholars spend time investigating are handed on to them by the stewards (e.g., mentors, dissertation directors, etc.) of the "intellectual lineages" into which they are "initiated" through graduate education. Peer recognition and long-term job security are usually gained by pursuing projects deemed credible by senior scholars within a discipline's major and minor sub-fields. An academic's most important task is, therefore, to help a field advance, rather than to effect positive and measurable

change in the wellbeing of the general populace.⁴⁰ Often, projects aimed at non-specialist Bible readers⁴¹ or looking at culturally specific appropriations of biblical traditions are deemed ancillary rather than central to a Bible scholar's essential tasks.⁴²

Second, I too realize that many of the papers I have read at the meetings of professional societies like SBL have been focused on topics as arcane as the text-criticism against which Avalos inveighs (65-101) and very much "pitched" toward a narrow and "elite" (27, 101) audience. Unfortunately, this is the nature of academic discourse. The academy rewards those who: develop a "specialty," control the pertinent primary sources, have hands on knowledge of the secondary literature, and make their professional "mark" by becoming the "voice" to which most of their peers listen. Gaining fluency in the *koine* of a sub-field takes time. Cultivation of professional contacts and the building of a cadre of colleagues with whom to collaborate requires years of networking. These activities leave little time for engagements outside of academe. In fact, research in the Arts, Humanities, Sciences, of theological disciplines today is so all encompassing that it virtually mandates disengagement from the non-academic world.

Third, I think that Avalos is absolute correct in his assertion that Bible scholars are ensconced in a global *matrix* that has a vested interest in the *commodification* of Scripture (340). From my point of view, this *matrix* is in fact a symbiotic network in which colleges, universities, divinity schools, seminaries, faith communities, parents, students, publishers, and the travel industry are key constituents. Avalos astutely notes that this

⁴⁰ The only exception is, perhaps, the service that some colleges and universities expect that faculty will render to the community outside of the academy.

⁴¹ Here, for example, one thinks immediately of popular or devotional commentaries on the Bible, construed as Scripture (i.e., authoritative text for a faith community).

⁴² As an example, I know that my interest in *Africana* esoteric biblical interpretation will not likely be held in the same regard, by some within the profession, the research I do on either early Hebrew poetry or Ugaritic myth. The former is an obscure micro-field within a sub-discipline (*Africana* Biblical Interpretation) of Biblical Hermeneutics.

biblical *commodity* is in fact made available and accessible through the production of critical editions, translations, and assorted print, electronic, audio, and other media (74, 325 – 334, 339). Clearly, these circumstances make one less than sanguine about our ability to determine with any degree of certainty which forces provide the real impetus for certain kinds of biblical research.

Finally, there is certainly merit in Avalos' contention that Bible scholars have done a poor job of conveying to the public the radically contingent nature of the discipline's fundamental tenets, conclusions, and implicit limitations. For example, I doubt that many outside of the academy are aware: that the Bible is not as *familiar* an artifact as many Americans believe (29); that parts of it are difficult at best to translate (37 – 58); that there is considerable disagreement as to whether its *Vorlage* can be reconstructed (65 – 101); that the picture of Syro-Palestinian history gained from archeological evidence and that garnered from biblical texts are not easily reconcilable (109 – 164); that whether substantial progress in the search for the Jesus of history has been made is a point of academic debate (185 – 212); and that literary and theological approaches to the Bible are based on an assortment of non-absolute ideological presuppositions (219 – 241, 249 – 280). Those of us in the profession talk about such matters regularly. However, they are not the normal fare encountered in religious or civic discourse today. Moreover, Avalos' suggestion that most research is, in fact, a construct in which the principal investigator "inscribes" (315) her/his identity within an interpretive meta-narrative has long been acknowledged within fields such as anthropology. Acceptance of this idea among Bible scholars is growing, though there are some who continue to see it as *Wissenschaft*.

In spite of these points of agreement, I am unable to support Avalos' call for Biblical Studies to be "tasked with eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world" (341). Neither do I believe that elimination of "sacred texts is imperative when those sacred texts

imperil the existence of human civilization as it is currently configured” (342). People, whether they live in isolation or in social aggregates, generate and ascribe varying degrees of authority to an assortment of texts and traditions.

In my opinion, what we need are people willing to be vigilant readers and critics of authoritative texts. We need to promote a *dialectic* of cross-cultural and humanistic encounter that celebrates diversity, promotes reasoned discussion, and eschews religious violence in any form. We need to face squarely the problematic concepts and theologies found in the Bible and engage in frank discussion about them in the classroom, in print, and within communities of faith and conscience. A recalibrated discipline of Biblical Studies should promote this new *dialectic* and distance itself gradually from older and narrower disciplinary conceptions in which the biblical critic is omniscient *hegemon* and biblical scholarship is totalizing narrative.

In closing, it is fortuitous that the fourteenth colloquium of the Institute coincides with what will be the final *joint* meeting of the AAR and SBL for some time. Avalos’ assertion that we should bring biblical studies, at least as we in the academy have come to know it, to an end (339) is a haunting one as many ponder what this institutional separation may mean for Bible and Religious Studies scholars in the future. The potential impact of this “divorce” on Afroasiatic Studies, and on members of the aforementioned societies that have an interest in the field, needs to be considered.

Hector Avalos is deserving of our thanks for allowing us the opportunity to consider his provocative thesis, both at the IAACR symposium and in print through this special edition of *Anduraru*. Thanks are also due to the four scholars who agreed to serve as members of the review panel and allowed their comments to be made available in this volume: Drs. Christopher Heard, Alan Lenzi, Niels Peter Lemche, and Jeremy Schipper. Collectively, their “perspectives” on *The End of Biblical*

Studies have given us much to ponder. Perhaps more importantly, they have modeled various *ways* of considering the future of one of the disciplines that brings so many of us to professional conferences such as those sponsored by the SBL and IAACR each year.

Conversation, debate, the exchange of ideas, the breaking of bread – such activities *democratize* access to knowledge. They also build communities of conscience, however modest in size, that have the ability to promote responsible oversight of the larger academic enterprise. The future of Biblical Studies remains to be seen. That scholars – some long established, others at the beginning of their careers – continue to reflect on the Bible’s vitality and relevance is a sign that the field of Biblical Studies, while not without its acute problems, is anything but moribund.

IAACR

The Institute for Ancient Near Eastern and Afroasiatic Cultural Research

The Institute for Ancient Near Eastern and Afroasiatic Cultural Research (IAACR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study of those ancient cultures whose languages are part of the Afroasiatic *phylum*. It has three broadly defined goals:

- To encourage the analysis of the full range of phenomena found within these cultures (e.g., language, social and political structure, subsistence activities, religion, and expressive culture)
- To facilitate the examination of historiographic works and other secondary sources that interpret the aforementioned phenomena; such includes the study of the impact of reflexivity in the interpretation of primary sources, the development of research agenda within those disciplines that study these artifacts, and the assessment of the relationship between Afroasiatic cultural research and pedagogy
- To promote the time-specific cross-cultural comparison of ancient cultures in the Mediterranean, Africa, Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, and beyond

Through the sponsorship of colloquia, seminars, and occasional publications, the Institute seeks to foster interdisciplinary scholarship that is visionary in scope and intellectually rigorous in execution. Through the formation of a coalition of active scholars, it hopes to engender a spirit of cooperation and collegiality among those engaged in Afroasiatic research. Via the development of continuing education events, it seeks – as well – to assist scholars in the acquisition of additional skills that will facilitate their participation in interdisciplinary dialogue and research.

Additional information about IAACR and its programming is available from:

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