

2007

The End of Biblical Studies

Hector Avalos

Iowa State University, havalos@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_books



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Avalos, Hector, "The End of Biblical Studies" (2007). *Philosophy and Religious Studies Books*. 2.
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_books/2

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy and Religious Studies at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy and Religious Studies Books by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

CONTENTS

<i>ABBREVIATIONS</i>	9
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	11
<i>NOTES TO THE READERS</i>	13
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	15
Brief Statement of Our Thesis	16
Irrelevance Defined	17
Irrelevance by the Numbers	18
The Paradox of Biblical Scholarship	20
Canons and Professionalism	22
Anti-intellectualism and Our Thesis	24
The End of Everything?	25
Personal Background	26
Organization	28
Summary	29
PART 1: HOW THE MAIN SUBDISCIPLINES OF BIBLICAL STUDIES CONCEAL THE IRRELEVANCE OF THE BIBLE	35
<i>CHAPTER 1: TRANSLATIONS: HIDING IN PLAIN SENSE</i>	37
Basic Translation Theory	38

6 CONTENTS

Dynamic/Functional Equivalence	40
Politically Correct Polytheism	43
Creating Mistranslations	44
Numerous Mistranslations	47
Dehumanizing Humanism	49
Sugarcoating Jesus	50
Engendering Inclusivity	53
Sanitizing Anti-Judaism	56
Summary	58
CHAPTER 2: TEXTUAL CRITICISM: "THE ORIGINAL SIN"	65
Theological Origins	66
The Illusion of "The Original"	68
Why We Can't Recover "The Original"	69
The Masoretic Text	72
The Dead Sea Scrolls	74
Is There a Final Form of a Text?	77
Religionism and the Dead Sea Scrolls	80
The New Testament	83
The Textus Receptus	85
The Textus Receptus Overthrown?	87
The Nestle-Aland/UBS Editions	89
Arbitrary Methods	91
Are Central Teachings Affected?	95
Mark 16:9–20	97
John 7:53–8:11	98
1 John 5:7–8	99
Summary	100
CHAPTER 3: HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY:	
FIELDS FULL OF HOLES	109
Is Postmodernism the Problem?	111
Minimalists and Maximalists	111
Knowledge, Fact, and Belief	113
Dever and Windschuttle	115
Dever Goes to Pots	121
Tel Dan about David?	127
Solomon and Bill's Gates	130
Out on a Date	135

Solomon's Palace?	138
Forging Ahead	141
The Divided Monarchy and Statehood	145
Nationalism and Archaeology	151
Nationalism and Chronology	153
King Arthur as Analogy	154
Arthurian Archaeology	160
So What Do We Know?	162
Summary	163
CHAPTER 4: THE UNHISTORICAL JESUS	185
Resurrecting the Resurrection	186
Marian Apparitions and the Resurrection	191
Selective Supernaturalism	194
The Liberal Academic Jesuses	196
The Jesus Seminar	198
Stanley Porter's New Criteria	203
Why We Cannot Make Progress	209
Other Gospels Change Everything	210
Summary	212
CHAPTER 5: LITERARY CRITICISM: AESTHETICS AS APOLOGETICS	219
A Brief History of Aesthetics	221
Is Isaiah 40 a Masterpiece?	223
Symmetry and Beauty	224
Is Dissymmetry Ugly?	227
Artistry and Creativity	229
Alphabet Soup	232
Narrative Beauty?	233
Law, Education, and Aesthetics	234
Ethics and Aesthetics	237
Summary	240
CHAPTER 6: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: THE PATHOLOGY OF BIBLIOLATRY	249
Historical Background	250
Walther Eichrodt	251
Walter Brueggemann	256

8 CONTENTS

Jon D. Levenson	261
Feminist Theologies	271
Liberation Theologies	273
Summary	280
PART 2: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF BIBLICAL STUDIES	289
CHAPTER 7: ACADEMIA: RELIGIONISM BY DEGREES	291
Twentieth-Century Rationales	292
Harvard University	295
The University of Chicago	298
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	300
Summary	301
CHAPTER 8: THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE	307
Brief History	309
What Scholars Care About	311
The <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>	312
Scholars as Heroes	315
No Job for You	316
The SBL Forum	319
Summary	321
CHAPTER 9: THE MEDIA-PUBLISHING COMPLEX	325
Print Media	326
<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>	328
The Film Industry	331
Television	333
Summary	334
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION	339
APPENDIX	343
BIBLIOGRAPHY	345
INDEXES	385

ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	American Academy of Religion
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , D. N. Freedman, ed.
AIA	Archaeological Institute of America
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BAS	Biblical Archaeology Society
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
BR	<i>Bible Review</i>
BS	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEV	Contemporary English Version
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
DTRH	The Deuteronomistic History
GNB	Good News Bible
HSM	<i>Harvard Semitic Monographs</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , G. A. Buttrick et al.
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>

- JAOS** *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JBL** *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JNES** *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
- JRAS** *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
- JSOT** *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
- JSOTSUP** *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series*
- KJV** King James Version
- KTU** *Die Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*, G. A. Buttrick et al.
- MT** Masoretic Text
- NAB** New American Bible
- NEA** *Near Eastern Archaeology*
- NIV** New International Version
- NRSV** New Revised Standard Version
- NT** New Testament
- NTS** *New Testament Studies*
- OEANE** *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, E. Meyers, ed.
- OT** Old Testament
- PMLA** *Publications of the Modern Language Association*
- REB** Revised English Bible
- RSN** *Religious Studies News*
- RSV** Revised Standard Version
- SBL** Society of Biblical Literature
- TNIV** Today's New International Version
- UBS** United Bible Societies
- VT** *Vetus Testamentum*
- ZAW** *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
- ZDMG** *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*
- ZDVP** *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*B*ooks, much like films, are productions involving a large cast of characters and behind-the-scenes personnel. This production would not have been possible without the help of my wife, Cynthia Avalos, who, as executive producer, kept my life in order so that I could write the bulk of this book in one intense summer in 2006. She helped proofread the manuscript, and she provided a sympathetic ear for all the usual vexations authors have.

Quincy Miller, my research assistant and stagehand, gathered many of the materials used in this book, and he proofread portions of the manuscript.

Writing critiques of friends, professional colleagues, and former professors is not easy. With regard to my former professors, I hope that they see my critiques as partly due to their success in imparting a sense of critical analysis and devotion to truth, no matter where it leads. In particular, I would thank William G. Dever and Frank Moore Cross, whose work I critique here.

Raz Kletter, of the Israel Antiquities Authority, was kind enough to grant his permission to use two figures from an article of his that I critique, and he also provided additional bibliographical references to his work.

My thanks also to Steven Mitchell and Paul Kurtz who, through Prometheus Books, have provided an important forum for voicing my ideas.

As usual, I must thank Rusty, our omniscient squirrel, and his friend, Skippy, who provided endless entertainment when writer's fatigue subjugated me.

I hereby absolve them all for my transgressions.



NOTES TO THE READERS

 Our discussions of the Bible translations and textual variations necessitate the use of various versions, as no one version illustrates our arguments. But unless noted otherwise, all of our biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, as presented in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). For the Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew text, we depend on the following:

GREEK: Kurt Aland et al. *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998).

HEBREW: K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds. *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983).

We use foreign words in our main text as sparingly as possible, and only when deemed necessary for understanding our arguments. However, in cases where foreign language sources were available, we have included more complete foreign language extracts in the footnotes for the benefit of scholars.



INTRODUCTION

The only mission of biblical studies should be to end biblical studies as we know it. This book will explain why I have come to such a conclusion. In the process, it will review the history of academic biblical studies as primarily a religionist apologetic enterprise, despite its partial integration of secularist epistemologies. The majority of biblical scholars in academia are primarily concerned with maintaining the value of the Bible despite the fact that the important questions about its origin have either been answered or cannot be answered. More importantly, we will show how academia, despite claims to independence, is still part of an ecclesial-academic complex that collaborates with a competitive media industry.

Most standard histories will grant that biblical studies began as an apologetic enterprise.¹ Few biblical scholars will admit that it is still just that. The largest organization of professional biblical scholars, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), began as the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in New York City in 1880, and its chief members included Philip Schaff, Charles A. Briggs, and Francis Brown. Some of these men represented the more liberal streams of scholarship. A few were friendly toward the then emerging "higher criticism," which dared to question the authorship and historicity of many biblical events.² Yet all were religious in some way. They all believed the Bible was worth keeping in the modern world.

Today, the Society of Biblical Literature is larger and more pluralistic in representation. One will find Jews represented, whereas there were none at

the first meeting of the SBL. Secular humanists, such as myself, have participated in reading many papers. Although still heavily dominated by men, the SBL has more women members than even twenty years ago. The SBL is no longer centered in the northeast, and its members come to its massive annual meetings, usually in the United States, from countries all over the globe.

But important features have remained constant. *The main bond is bibliolatry*, which entails the conviction that the Bible is valuable and should remain the subject of academic study. Equally important, the Society of Biblical Literature, while now relatively more free of denominationalist agendas, is still religionist in orientation. Scholars still are either part of faith communities, or see their work as assisting faith communities directly or indirectly. One of the most prominent Jewish biblical scholars today, Jon D. Levenson, comments: “[T]he motivations of most historical critics of the Hebrew Bible continues to be religious in character. It is a rare scholar in the field whose past does not include an intense Christian or Jewish commitment.”³ Atheists may read papers at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, but usually only when such papers do not challenge the relevance of biblical studies itself.

BRIEF STATEMENT OF OUR THESIS

For our purposes, we can summarize our plea to end biblical studies as we know it with two main premises:

1. Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Bible is the 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).

The first premise acknowledges that we have indeed discovered much new information about the Bible. The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and the enor-

mous archaeological treasures found in the ancient Near East in the last one hundred fifty years or so have set the Bible more firmly in its original cultural context. However, it is those very discoveries that show that the Bible is irrelevant, insofar as it is part of a world radically dissimilar to ours in its conception of the cosmos, the supernatural, and the human sense of morality. In fact, in a 1975 report published by the American Academy of Religion, one scholar frankly admitted that “[i]ndeed, one of the enduring contributions of biblical studies in this century has been the discovery of the strangeness of the thought-forms of the biblical literature of the ‘western’ tradition to us.”⁴ In short, scholars of religion themselves, not just secular humanists, admit that the Bible is a product of an ancient and very different culture.

IRRELEVANCE DEFINED

“Irrelevant” here refers to a biblical concept or practice that is no longer viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical. Thus, whereas most Americans today regard genocide as contemptible, that was not the case in many biblical texts. In fact, Michael Coogan, a widely respected biblical scholar, admits that some biblical practices are so objectionable today that churches try to hide parts of the Bible from their members. As Coogan phrases it,

Conspicuously absent from lectionaries are most or all of such books as Joshua, with its violent extermination of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan at divine command, or Judges, with its horrifying narratives of patriarchy and sexual assault in chapters 11 and 19—to say nothing of the Song of Solomon, with its charged eroticism, or of Job, with its radical challenge to the dominant biblical view of a just and caring God.⁵

Likewise, our modern medical establishment has discarded the supernatural explanations for illness found in the Bible, rendering such explanations irrelevant. Here are some more examples of scientific and scholarly “discoveries” that provide further evidence of the Bible’s irrelevance:

- Though modern science has demonstrated otherwise, some biblical authors held that the universe was created in only six days.
- Despite the weight that theologians place on the words and deeds of the great figures in the Bible (Abraham, Moses, and David), research indicates that these figures are not as “historical” as once thought.
- There is no independent evidence for the life or teachings of Jesus in

the first century CE, which means that most modern Christians are not even following Jesus' teachings.

- Biblical authors generally believed that women were subordinate to men.

As we shall argue, even when many persons in the modern world still hold to biblical ideas (e.g., creationism), it is partly because academic biblical scholars are not sufficiently vocal about undermining outdated biblical beliefs. Instead, such scholars concentrate on maintaining the value of the biblical text in modern society.

IRRELEVANCE BY THE NUMBERS

The idea that the Bible is irrelevant, even among those who regard themselves as Christian, can be demonstrated empirically very easily. For decades, the Gallup organization has conducted surveys on biblical literacy. Such surveys have repeatedly demonstrated that despite professed adherence to the Bible, most Christians are either ignorant of the Bible or their appeal to the Bible is very limited. In fact, a 1942 survey showed that about 41 percent of Americans had not read from the Bible in the previous twelve months.⁶

In a detailed survey of American faith in the 1990s, Gallup polls found that "eight in ten Americans say they are Christians, but only four in ten know that Jesus, according to the Bible, delivered the Sermon on the Mount."⁷ That is not a great improvement over the 34 percent of respondents who knew that fact in 1954.⁸ Thus, a majority of self-professed Christians did not know the basic facts of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), which outlines what most scholars consider a fundamental message of Christianity.⁹ A 2005 Gallup poll showed that "[f]ewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible."¹⁰

Despite apparent improvements in some aspects of biblical literacy, biblical literacy advocates judge recent strides to be inadequate. One such advocate is the Bible Literacy Project, which works closely with the Gallup organization. In a 2005 report, the Bible Literacy Project noted that while a majority of American teens have a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible, "substantial minorities lack even the most basic working knowledge of the Bible."¹¹ If we return to the benchmark question about the Sermon on the Mount, most teenagers surveyed "either responded that they did not know (27%) or incorrectly (36%) believed some other quotation presented to them was from the Sermon on the Mount."¹²

For Estes, “degree of transfer” and “continuity” refer to how obliged a modern audience is to follow what is addressed to an “original audience” in the Bible. Something close to the zero side would be considered obsolete whereas something at 10 would be considered a directive that Christians must still follow.

He then provides the example of the law of first fruits in Deuteronomy 26:1–11, which commands Israelites to go to a location chosen by Yahweh to provide the priest with the first yields of their agricultural season. Estes would rank this close to the zero side of the scale (obsolete precepts) because, among other things, most modern Christians no longer are farmers, nor do they recognize a central location that Yahweh has chosen.

Estes recognizes that “[n]one of these specific items has a precise equivalent in the identity and experience of Christian believers today. . . . Many of the Old Testament legal prescriptions are in this category, including, for example, the dietary regulations.”²² When pressed to find examples of “total continuity” between the original biblical audience and today’s Christian audience, he admits that “[i]ndisputable examples of total continuity between the two audiences are relatively rare.”²³

John Bright, regarded as one of the most outstanding American biblical scholars of the last century, reflected a similar sentiment regarding the sabbatical and jubilee years in Leviticus 25, when he remarked that “the regulations described therein are obviously so little applicable to the modern situation that a preacher might be pardoned if he told himself that the passage contains no relevant message for his people whatever.”²⁴ In fact, if we were to go verse by verse, I suspect that 99 percent of the Bible would not even be missed, as it reflects many practices, injunctions, and ideas not much more applicable than Leviticus 25.

THE PARADOX OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Our second major premise is that despite this admission of irrelevance the profession of academic biblical scholarship paradoxically and self-servingly promotes the illusion of relevance. The maintenance of this illusion is intended to make believers think that they have “the Bible” when all they really have is a book constructed by modern elite scholars. So even if 99.9 percent of modern Christians said that the Bible was relevant to them, such relevance is based on their illusory assumption that modern versions do reflect the original “Bible” to some extent.²⁵ Promoting the illusion of rele-

vance serves to justify the very existence of the profession of biblical scholarship, and not much more.

I, of course, cannot claim to be the first to raise the question of the relevance of biblical studies. In fact, we can find similar conclusions at least by the beginning of the twentieth century in the work of Friedrich Delitzsch, a professor at Berlin University. In the period from 1902 to 1904 he delivered three lectures that ignited the so-called Babel-Bible debate.²⁶ In these lectures Delitzsch began to outline how the new discoveries in Mesopotamia were forcing biblical scholars to rethink the whole idea that the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was superior to any other ancient document.

In the early 1920s, Delitzsch took his ideas to their logical conclusion in *The Great Deception (Die Grosse Täuschung)*, an inflammatory two-volume work that mounted a full-scale assault on the place of the Old Testament in modern life.²⁷ He wrote that “insofar as religion is concerned, all these Old Testament books, from Genesis to Daniel, have absolutely no meaning for us today, and especially as Christians.”²⁸ In addition, he said that “the so-called ‘Old Testament’ is completely disposable for the Christian Church and for the Christian community.”²⁹ Unfortunately, his anti-Judaism clouded some of the more legitimate questions he had raised about the reasons Western society continued to privilege this set of books.

In his 2005 essay titled “Do We Need Biblical Scholars?” Philip Davies, the British biblical scholar notorious for emphasizing the lack of historicity of many biblical accounts, asked the questions

Can biblical scholars persuade others that they conduct a legitimate academic discipline? Until they do, can they convince anyone that they have something to offer to the intellectual life of the modern world? Indeed, I think many of us have to convince ourselves first!³⁰

Despite his lack of religious belief pertaining to the Bible, Davies concluded that he would still advocate on behalf of the relevance of biblical scholarship in the modern world. Similarly, Jacques Berlinerblau, a secularist, believes that although biblical scholars have failed to see the dire implications of their own discoveries secularists must still seek to be biblically literate.³¹

And, of course, throughout Jewish and Christian history there has been discussion about the relevance of certain passages, books, or even large sections of the Bible. One need only remember the notorious proposal of Marcion, the Gnostic writer of the second century: he advocated for the ejection of the entire Old Testament from Christian life.³² Martin Luther relegated the book of James to a sort of subordinate status. Thomas Jefferson deleted all

the material he deemed unnecessary and irrelevant in order to create the “Jefferson Bible.”³³ Nonetheless, each of these individuals thought that some parts of scripture were worth keeping.

Our argument is that there is really nothing in the entire book Christians call “the Bible” that is any more relevant than anything else written in the ancient world. Similar sentiments have been expressed in regard to religious studies as a whole. In 1997, Russell McCutcheon wrote *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*.³⁴ He argued that the concept of religion as being *sui generis*—i.e., “self-generated,” and not a phenomenon that can be reduced to psychology, sociology, or any other natural aspect of human experience—is fundamentally flawed, and serves to maintain the relevance of the profession of religious studies. By saying that religion is unique and self-generated one can argue for its continued existence and relevance.

Timothy Fitzgerald, another prominent scholar of religion, argues that “[a]t one level the so-called study of religion (also called the science of religion, religious studies, comparative religion and phenomenology of religion) is a disguised form of liberal ecumenical theology.”³⁵ He also observes that “even in the work of scholars who are explicitly non-theological, half disguised theological presuppositions persistently distort the analytical pitch.”³⁶ Although we ultimately disagree with Timothy Fitzgerald’s notion that religion does not really exist, we agree that what passes for religious studies today is permeated by theological assumptions.³⁷

The place of biblical and religious studies in academia is being questioned even by Christian historians and theologians, though for reasons different from ours. One case in point is Darryl G. Hart, a Christian historian who argues that religion has actually suffered when integrated into academic study. As he phrases it, “religion does better without the blessing of the university.”³⁸ Hart concludes: “It may be time for faithful academics to stop trying to secure a religion-friendly university while paying deference to the academic standards of the modern university.”³⁹

CANONS AND PROFESSIONALISM

Parallel critiques have been launched in other fields of study. English and literature studies, in particular, have come under sharp attack as professions concerned primarily with the promotion and maintenance of their own power.⁴⁰ Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital,” the lit-

erary critic John Guillory provides an incisive analysis of how the idea of "expanding" the traditional Eurocentric canon or allowing that canon to be more "multicultural" constitutes window dressing for a much deeper and more fundamental feature of literary studies.⁴¹ Guillory characterizes cultural capital thus: "If there exists a form of capital which is specifically symbolic or cultural, the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of this capital presupposes the division of society into groups that can be called classes."⁴²

Guillory argues that the problem of constructing a canon, the general name for a privileged set of books, is a problem in "cultural capital," because mastering a particular set of books is a way to distribute power in a society. According to Guillory, canon construction and maintenance has little to do with literary quality, which is itself a social construct. Shakespeare is read not because it has any higher literary value than other works, but because "knowing Shakespeare" might function as a credential in elite circles. Furthermore, the individuals in control of canon formation are not the authors, since a "far larger role belongs to the school itself, which regulates access to literary production by regulating access to literacy, to the practices of reading and writing."⁴³

On a broader scale, these sorts of studies are a critique of "professionalism," by which power is invested in knowledge specialists.⁴⁴ In his classic study of this social phenomenon, Burton J. Bledstein sees professionalism in America as emerging with the middle class, particularly after the Civil War, when there was a surge in the number of professional organizations.⁴⁵ Fully consistent with this trend is the Society of Biblical Literature (and Exegesis), which was born in 1880.

One can, of course, detect Marxist theory behind such piquant critiques of professionalism and literary studies. But one need not be a Marxist to make these observations, and Guillory grants that Marx "undertheorized" the concept of class.⁴⁶ Instead, Guillory and like-minded critics argue that relevant knowledge must be grounded in an awareness of how knowledge is used to create class distinctions and power differentials. 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.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND OUR THESIS

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Richard Hofstadter acutely demonstrated that anti-intellectualism has a long history in America.⁴⁷ In general, Hofstadter argued that American anti-intellectualism has been a response to the power that professionals have accumulated at the expense of the working class. Accordingly, readers might rightly wonder if we are simply engaging in another version of anti-intellectualism in challenging the existence of biblical academic studies. After all, why not extend our thesis to all ancient literature?

But we see false intellectualism and intellectual dishonesty in most efforts to maintain the relevance of the Bible. One example will suffice for now. In 1998, Howard Clark Kee, a widely respected New Testament scholar, coedited a volume with Irvin J. Borowsky titled *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament*. Anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament, indeed, have led to violence against Jews. But one solution proposed by Borowsky was this:

The solution to erasing this hatred is for bible societies and religious publishers to produce two editions, one for the public similar to the Contemporary English Version which reduces significantly this anti-Judaic potential, and the other edition for scholars taken from the Greek text.⁴⁸

What is being proposed here is nothing short of paternalistic deception. Borowsky and like-minded scholars know that parts of the Bible endorse and promote hateful and violent speech against Jews, but instead of urging the world to move beyond dependence on the biblical text at all, they simply want to preserve it in sanitized form. The masses will get the sanitized Bible constructed for them by scholars, and only scholars will have the version that best corresponds to the original meaning.

Fixation on the Bible also diverts attention from the thousands of texts of other cultures that still lie untranslated. If we succeed, the Bible would become simply one of many ancient texts, no more or less worthy of attention for its historical, moral, or aesthetic value. Study would be centered on how alien the Bible is rather than on how compatible it is with modern society. While we can extend our critique to all ancient literature, we focus on what we perceive to be the most egregious and historically important example.

Another potential challenge to my thesis is that I myself would be hyp-

ocritical to continue in biblical studies. However, while I concede that this would be true if I were pursuing biblical studies for the sake of keeping the field alive, I have instead used my work in biblical studies to persuade people to abandon reliance on this book. I see my goal as no different from physicians, whose goal of ending human illness would lead to their eventual unemployment. The same holds true for me. I would be hypocritical only if I sought to maintain the relevance of my profession despite my belief that the profession is irrelevant. If I work to inform people of the irrelevance of the Bible for modern life, then I am fully consistent with my beliefs.

THE END OF EVERYTHING?

From a different angle, our work is part of the proliferation of books preoccupied with the finality of different aspects of the human experience. Perhaps the most famous recent example is Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (2002), in which he argued that liberal democracy constitutes the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution," so that we should expect no new historical developments in world history.⁴⁹ Fukuyama's thesis, of course, has been misunderstood to mean that historical events would end. However, the truth is that he has a more Hegelian view of history, in which history ends when a sort of stasis in the development of new ideas is reached. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy cannot be superseded and will triumph over any other competing political idea; people will see its advantages and will universally adopt it. And so, in that sense, history will end.

Our thesis differs from Fukuyama's in several ways. First, I do not argue that the end of biblical studies will mean the end of history or even the end of religion. The end of biblical studies addresses only a part of a larger phenomenon we call religion. Our project addresses that part of religion that is expressed in textual or inscripturated forms, and more specifically the forms assumed in Judaism and Christianity. The end of religion might mean the end of history, insofar as I hold that secular approaches to life will result in the minimization of human suffering, though not its end. However, unlike Fukuyama, who sees liberal democracy as a sort of panacea, I hold that scarce resources are so inherent on our planet that liberal democracy is only part of a solution that must include secular humanism to truly mean "the end" of history.⁵⁰

Our thesis is contraposed to that of Richard Horsley, who sees the purpose of religious and biblical studies as being in part "to enable students of

religion to develop a criticism of imperial power and its effects.”⁵¹ As John Roth notes, Horsley is simply substituting his own hegemonic view of what biblical studies should be for what he deems inadequate.⁵² More importantly, Horsley exemplifies the scholarship that doesn’t deem New Testament Christianity to be itself an imperialist project from the start. Horsley sees the rise of Christianity as a response to the hegemony of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean world. But he fails to see that movements that form to resist empire usually have as their goal the establishment of their own empire.⁵³

Mine is a frank secular humanist view of biblical studies. And rather than pretend I am not hegemonic, I hold that (1) all worldviews, even those that claim pluralism, are hegemonic because they inevitably seek power over those that have a nonpluralistic worldview, and (2) a pluralistic religious hegemony is a politically expedient means to persuade people to adopt a secular humanist hegemony, which I believe holds the best prospect for a better global society. Phrased more frankly, religious pluralism is good so long as it does not interfere with secular humanism’s goals.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

My realization that modern biblical studies should be abolished did not come overnight. Rather, it came after a sustained period of healthy self-criticism. Briefly, I grew up in a Pentecostal Protestant home, and I became a child evangelist soon after immigrating to the United States in the 1960s. During high school I decided to become a biblical scholar in order to fight atheism and other religions. In the process, I realized that I had no better grounds for my belief than the believer in any other religion. I saw that atheism was the most honest choice I could make.

However, I did not abandon biblical studies because of atheism. Instead, I grew more curious about where this book had actually originated and how it had come to be the most influential book in history. So I entered the University of Arizona in the hope of becoming a biblical archaeologist. Unfortunately, illness made me shift to a more literary and historical study of the Bible. At the University of Arizona, I encountered the exciting ideas and work of William G. Dever, who at that time had the most vibrant program in Near Eastern archaeology in the world. In 1983, I went to Harvard University, and earned a Master of Theological Studies (1985) and a PhD (1991) in Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic philology in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

While still an undergraduate at the University of Arizona, I joined the Society of Biblical Literature in an effort to familiarize myself with the latest discussions and to begin integrating myself into the organization whose members would later accept or reject me in my search for academic employment. I made many friends in the society, and I have collaborated on some important projects sponsored by the SBL, including a forthcoming book on disabilities in biblical studies.⁵⁴

I remember the excitement of my first annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1982, at the Hilton in New York City. Many bearers of famous names strolled the halls. I remember my embarrassment as I flagged down one heralded scholar, only to realize that I had called him by the wrong name. I remember sitting in small table discussion with Norman Geisler, a dean of Christian apologetics. The topic was the state of creationism in the aftermath of the famous trial in Arkansas.⁵⁵

Before receiving my PhD in 1991, I had already published a refereed critical note in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the primary publication of the SBL, and probably the most important journal in the field.⁵⁶ In that year, I also obtained my first employment as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I had a joint appointment in religious studies and anthropology.

My enthusiasm for the field was immense then. But I began to see that despite good scholars and good discussions, the bulk of the SBL membership was intent on beating a dead horse. The more I learned about all the major discoveries in biblical studies, the more I saw that fewer and fewer papers had anything new to say. What they did say was either bland, ambiguous, or outright fatuous. Since 1982, I have encountered only about a dozen truly memorable papers.

My papers were not much better. I read papers on textual criticism, healthcare, and many other subjects. But I was becoming increasingly introspective about why I was doing research in those particular subjects. More and more influenced by the idea that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is simply another way of describing an elite leisure pursuit, I became distressed at how few papers actually centered on the idea that knowledge is meant to help people live in a better world.

In 2004 there was a definite shift in what I read at the SBL Annual Meeting. I no longer was content to help academic biblical studies remain afloat. I wanted to reform biblical studies. Part of it was driven by my work on violence in the Bible.⁵⁷ I was distressed to see that biblical scholars would discuss biblical violence, and even acknowledge that it should no longer be

tolerable, but few, if any, were willing to repudiate the Bible for its endorsement of violence.⁵⁸ After my book *Fighting Words* was published in 2005, I decided to take what I had learned to its logical conclusion and write a book advocating the end of biblical studies as we know it.

ORGANIZATION

Our critique is organized into two parts. Part 1, consisting of chapters 1 through 6, details how the major subdisciplines of biblical studies are still dominated by religionist agendas despite the claim that they are using scientific and/or critical approaches. These subdisciplines include translation, textual criticism, historical and archaeological criticism, literary criticism, and biblical theology. Part 1 also contains concrete examples of how the major findings of those subdisciplines form an argument for the irrelevance of the Bible in modern society.

Chapter 1 (“Translations”) focuses on how translations, which are the main source of the Bible’s relevance for the masses, are more about hiding what the Bible says than they are about actually reflecting its original meaning and context. Chapter 2 (“Textual Criticism”) addresses the failure of textual criticism to reconstruct the “original” text of the Bible. Chapter 3 (“History and Archaeology: Fields Full of Holes”) shows how all the major findings of historians and archaeologists have served to ruin previous confidence in the “history” supposedly related in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Chapter 4 (“The Unhistorical Jesus”) examines the failure of academic biblical studies to recover the historical Jesus.

In chapter 5 (“Literary Criticism: Aesthetics as Apologetics”) we turn our lens to the practice of “literary criticism,” which is simply another instrument to keep the Bible alive by claiming that it possesses literary and aesthetic merit superior to other works of literature. Chapter 6 (“Biblical Theology”) deconstructs the discipline of biblical theology, describing it as a flawed effort to outline a coherent message about the biblical God.

Part 2, spanning chapters 7 through 10, focuses on the infrastructure of biblical studies, and particularly the economic and political institutions and mechanisms by which the profession maintains its relevance despite the findings of its subdisciplines. Chapter 7 (“Academia”) shows how academia, despite its commitment to scientific and secular modes of research, has allowed religious studies to remain dominated by religionist and theological agendas. Chapter 8 (“The Society of Biblical Literature”) deconstructs the

religious agendas of the largest professional organizations that support biblical scholars, with a more particular focus on the Society of Biblical Literature.

Chapter 9 outlines the intimate relationship between the media (book and magazine publishers and the film industry) and academia in order to show that biblical scholars rather than being engaged in objective scholarship about the Bible are most frequently in the service of communities of faith. A conclusion (chapter 10) will summarize my results and outline what we might do to close the book on the religionist agendas in the modern academic study of the Bible.

SUMMARY

Biblical studies as we know it should end. We should now treat the Bible as the alien document it is, with no more importance than the other works of literature we ignore every day. 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. One day, the Bible might even be viewed as one of the curiosities of a tragic bibliolatrous age, when dependence on a text brought untold misery and stood as an obstacle to human progress. We might then study the Bible as a lesson in why human beings should never again privilege any book to this extent.

NOTES

1. For some standard histories, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

2. For a standard history of the Society of Biblical Literature, see Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

3. Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 30.

4. Paul G. Wiebe, "The Place of Theology in Religious Studies," in *The Aca-*

demic Study of Religion: 1975: Public Schools Religion Studies: 1975, ed. Anne Carr and Nicholas Piediscalzi (Missoula, MT: American Academy of Religion, 1975), p. 24.

5. Michael Coogan, "The Great Gulf between Scholars and the Pew," in *Biblical Studies Alternatively: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), p. 7.

6. George Gallup and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 6. Despite the title, the book reports on polls conducted in the 1980s.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

9. For a general treatment of the Beatitudes, see Hans D. Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L. L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress 1985), especially pp. 17–36; for a detailed survey of connections with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinical sources, see W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

10. See Leonard J. Greenspoon, "What Americans Believe about the Bible," *BR* 21, no. 5 (Winter 2005): 29.

11. Marie Wachlin, *Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Need to Know and What Do They Know?* (Front Royal, VA: Bible Literacy Project, 2006), p. 25; available at <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Secure/Documents/BibleLiteracyReport2005.pdf> (accessed August 27, 2006).

12. Wachlin, *Bible Literacy Report*, p. 35.

13. Greenspoon, "What Americans Believe," p. 29.

14. Christopher Bader et al., *American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights into the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the U.S.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion, 2006), p. 14, table 2; available online at <http://www.baylor.edu/isreligion/index.php?id=40634> (accessed September 12, 2006).

15. Coogan, "The Great Gulf," p. 7.

16. Ian Markham, "Teaching Theology in a Modern University," *Theology* 94, no. 760 (1991): 260–69.

17. On a more anecdotal level, I also conduct surveys of incoming students in my Bible classes at Iowa State University. One of the questions I ask is "How familiar are you with the Bible?" Inevitably, the vast majority of those who signal great familiarity at the start of the course are shown to have a false sense of familiarity.

18. Markham, "Teaching Theology," p. 267.

19. For an earlier and influential study of the role of religion in British universities, see Walter H. Moberly, *The Crisis in the University* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

20. Daniel J. Estes, "Audience Analysis and Validity in Application," *BS* 150 (April–June 1993): 219–29.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

24. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), p. 152. For a thoroughly unsatisfactory and desperate attempt to argue that Old Testament laws are still relevant, see Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006).

25. We refrain from saying “100 percent” because there are a small number of Christian scholars who do realize that modern Bibles are constructs, which may bear little similarity to “the original.”

26. I depend on these editions for the lectures of 1902, 1903, and 1904: Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel: Ein Vortrag*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1903); *Zweiter Vortrag über Babel und Bibel*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 1904); *Babel und Bibel: Dritter (Schluss-) Vortrag*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 1905). For a comprehensive edition, see Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel Streit* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); see also Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, “A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch’s ‘Babel und Bibel’ Lectures,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 441–57; Joel Sweek, “The Monuments, the *Babel-Bibel Streit* and Responses to Historical Criticism,” in *The Pitcher Is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta Ahlström*, ed. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 401–19.

27. I depend on this edition, in which two volumes, each with separate pagination, are bound into one: Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die Grosse Täuschung, Erster Teil, Kritische Betrachtungen zu des alttestamentlichen Berichten über Israels Eindringen in Kanaan, die Gottesoffenbarung vom Sinai und die Wirksamkeit der Propheten* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1921); Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die Grosse Täuschung, Zweiter (Schluss-)Teil, Fortgesetzte kritische Betrachtungen zum Alten Testament, vornehmlich den Prophetenschriften und Psalmen, nebst Schlussfolgerungen* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1921).

28. Delitzsch, *Die Grosse Täuschung*, 1:95: “Aber alle diese alttestamentlichen Bücher von Genesis bis Daniel haben in religiösen Beziehung für uns Jetztlebenden, insbesondere für uns Christen, schlechterdings keine Bedeutung.” My translation.

29. *Ibid.*, 1:97: “Das sog. ‘Alte Testament’ is für die christliche Kirche und damit für die christliche Familie vollkommen entbehrlich.” I translated “Familie” as “community,” though “family” may also be appropriate.

30. Philip Davies, “Do We Need Biblical Scholars?” *The Bible and Interpretation*, June 2005, available online at http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Davies_Biblical_Scholars.htm (accessed July 2, 2006).

31. Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 11: “The problem with modern biblical research is that it has not gone far enough. Too often, it has deferred to tradition, censured itself, and refused to pursue the delectably blasphemous implications of its own discoveries.”

32. For Marcion, see the old but still important study of E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: APGK, 1948).
33. For an edition of the "Jefferson Bible," see Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1942).
34. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 2003).
35. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 6.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
37. For recent examples of the debate over the existence of religion itself, see the exchanges between Robert A. Segal and Russell McCutcheon in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (2005): 720–56.
38. Darryl G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 251.
39. *Ibid.*
40. See also Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a recent defense of the academic study of literature, see Frank B. Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). See also the Special Topic issue of the *PMLA* ("The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature," *PMLA* 121, no. 1 [January 2006]), especially the contribution from Peter D. McDonald, "Ideas of the Book and Histories of Literature," pp. 214–28.
41. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For critical discussions of Guillory, see Bruce Robbins, "'Real Politics' and the Canon Debate," *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 2 (1994): 365–75; Bill Readings, "[Review of] *Cultural Capital*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 1994): 321–26; Christopher Ricks, "What Is at Stake in the 'Battle of the Books?'" *New Criterion* (September 1989): 40–44. For reactions to these developments, see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2004) and Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism / Postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990).
42. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. viii. For Bourdieu's relevant work, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1977).
43. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. ix.
44. Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton & Norton, 1976). For a massive study of the current state of the academic profession, see Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic World and Careers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

45. Bledstein, *Professionalism*, p. 8.

46. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. viii.

47. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963). See also Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Tradition and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

48. Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky, eds., *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament* (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance, 2000), p. 18.

49. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. xi. For other entries into this "terminal" genre, see Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

50. For a full exposition of my theory of scarce resources and religious violence, see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

51. Richard A. Horsley, "Religion and Other Products of Empire," *JAAR* 71, no. 1 (2003): 40.

52. See John K. Roth, "Response: Constructing and Deconstructing Empires," *JAAR* 71, no. 1 (2003): 121–28.

53. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, ed. Kenneth Thompson (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), see especially pp. 50–51.

54. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, eds. *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, forthcoming).

55. For discussions of this trial, see Langdon Gilkey, *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* (Minneapolis, MN: Winstons Press, 1985); Norman Geisler, with A. F. Brooke and Mark J. Keough, *The Creator in the Courtroom: "Scopes II"* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1982).

56. Hector Avalos, "Exodus 22:9 and Akkadian Legal Formulae," *JBL* 109 (1990): 116–17.

57. Avalos, *Fighting Words*.

58. For a critique that centers on "religionism" as a parallel to racism, see Ferren MacIntyre, "Was Religion a Kinship Surrogate?" *JAAR* 72, no. 3 (2004): 682–83.