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The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis

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# THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE AND EXEGESIS\*

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IT IS a sore temptation upon this occasion to discuss a theme of scientific import. Many such themes suggest themselves. But I must, instead, perform what I cannot but regard as a pressing duty. It is to review the present status and the apparent future of biblical studies in general and in America in particular, and the task of SBLE in relation thereto.

It is almost platitudinous to say that we stand today upon the threshold of a new epoch in biblical science; but platitudes are usually true and occasionally worth uttering. This new epoch is unfolding in two directions, and that too with unparalleled speed and urgency. The one direction is forward and, although not entirely free from traps and pitfalls, is bright with hope and promise. The other is completely negative and retrogressive and fraught with abundant danger and ever-increasing insecurity.

The first direction is that of the content and techniques of biblical science. My remarks must necessarily bear primarily upon the interpretation of the OT, for only in this field do I have a measure of competence. But I suspect that a like situation may exist in NT research also, even though perhaps to a somewhat less extent.

The techniques of documentary analysis of the OT are being increasingly outmoded. Correspondingly, many of the conclusions of the so-called Documentary Hypothesis, even some of major character, based primarily upon considerations of stylistic

\* The Presidential address delivered at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, December 29, 1941, at Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

variation, are becoming more and more subject to question. Likewise we are learning to put only a reasonable faith in the procedures and conclusions of form-analysis. The conviction forces itself upon us that the time has come to revalue the old techniques and to bring conclusions within the bounds of more exact and reliable scientific processes.

The realization is dawning upon us, I believe, that much surer evidence of the sources, the literary history and the meaning and cultural significance of distinct biblical documents may be found in the ideas, institutions and movements which they mirror, especially when coordinated with the unfolding historical picture. We are coming to see, with ever increasing clarity, that the writings of the OT, and of the NT as well, were not at all the offspring of timeless, impersonal, divine revelation, speaking in the vacuum of eternity, as it were, but were always firmly set in time and history. They voiced the soul of the little, God-conscious people of Israel, eternally seeking the solution of the mystery of life, eagerly aspiring to determine the divine purpose, to define the divine way, to come closer and ever closer to the divinely appointed goal, of existence. This it sought not only for itself, but also for the nations with whom it lived in intimate contact and with interacting relations and exchange of cultural possessions, and even for all mankind, whom it came, in time, to envisage as the ultimate unit in the divine scheme of things and the supreme object of divine solicitude. Accordingly the Bible, in all its parts, has its setting in time and history and can find its truest and most inspiring interpretation only in relation to history, to thoughts, doctrines, institutions, movements, events, aspirations, as these gradually unfolded in the history of Israel and its neighbors. Surely there are enough fixed and certain points in the history of Israel and its neighbors to justify this procedure and to establish it upon a firm, scientific foundation.

A wealth of new source material is being disclosed by archaeological discovery and folkloristic research; and, I may remark in passing, I like to think of folklore as archaeology too, and in a very realistic sense, the archaeology of ideas, beliefs, institutions, and rituals, of all the intangible elements of culture,

which persist, even though usually in shattered and distorted form, beneath the surface of present-day cultural life. From Palestine and all lands encompassing it this wealth of new knowledge is streaming in and establishes the role of Palestine and its people in the cultural life of the Near East.

The situation today is altogether comparable to that of forty years ago, when the young science of Assyriology was in its ascendancy. Just as then, so also today, we must be on guard against extravagance of claim on the part of the new science, and even more against potential rivalry and hostile competition between biblical science and the archaeology of the Near East. As has been said, the long established postulates of biblical science must now be evaluated more searchingly and responsibly than ever before. But they may not be discredited too easily in favor of the rather apodictical claims of zealous archaeologists. The fruits of one hundred years of scientific investigation of the literary stratification of biblical writings are not to be completely overthrown in a brief moment by the results of twenty years of scientific investigation of archaeological stratification. There must be a friendly and constructive synthesis of biblical science and archaeology. And such a synthesis will come surely and in the not too distant future, when the present quite natural ardor of archaeologists of the Near East will have cooled somewhat. Then biblical science will enter upon a new era of larger research, surer conclusion and more constructive application. It will no longer be looked upon askance by timid and reactionary religionists. Instead, it will be regarded, as it should be, as a true science, and will exert positive and progressive influence in religious and cultural thinking.

But here a warning! Biblical research is not merely one small province of a vast, all-inclusive world-empire of archaeology. It is and must remain an end in itself. Neither is the primary aim and measure of value of archaeology, even specifically the archaeology of the Near East, merely the interpretation of the Bible or the reconstruction of what is popularly called biblical history. Archaeology has a much larger sphere of investigation than this, the precise limits of which are still to be clearly defined, while biblical science, in turn, has realms of research

which reach out far beyond the uttermost range of archaeology. Biblical science and archaeology are sister sciences, whose provinces overlap to no small degree. Between them a close kinship and community of purpose exist. But we must beware of sacrificing the independence and dignity of biblical science and allowing its approved techniques and well established conclusions to be undermined too readily by the impetuous extravagance of a still youthful and somewhat too assertive kindred science. Synthesis and cooperation, in mutual understanding and goodwill, must be our goal. This synthesis will come. But mutual understanding and goodwill can remove many obstacles, warn of pitfalls and speed the attainment of the goal.

With the present unparalleled expansion and progress of archaeology, and especially archaeology of the Near East, and with the impending reformulation of its conclusions and techniques it is reasonable to believe that a new day is about to dawn for biblical science, a day of sure advance and abundant achievement. But the realization of this potentially bright future makes all the more tragic the immediate prospect.

Germany was, of course, the cradle of biblical science. There it was born and tenderly nourished for over one hundred years. With few exceptions its great figures were German scholars. Not a few of us here got our stimulus, and even our technical training, in Germany under German masters. The last generation of German biblical scholars, under whom we studied, were giants in their day. The present generation have upheld the tradition valiantly. Today, however, they face overwhelming odds. The Bible, both the OT and the NT, is in Germany a discredited and spiritually proscribed book. Though the majority of biblical scholars there still carry on eagerly, and despite the oft heard but almost incredible claim of expanding interest in Bible study and of increasing enrollment in university classes, we know that in Germany biblical science is doomed. In the present atmosphere of hostility toward the Bible and toward the religions founded thereon, and under the influence of all-encompassing totalitarian pragmatism, with the consequent disorganization of academic life, biblical science must soon be stifled and must inevitably succumb. Our friends and fellow-workers,

not only in Germany but also in the occupied countries, will be, of this we may be sadly certain, for the present stage of biblical science at least, the last generation of Bible scholars.

In Great Britain too the progress of biblical science cannot but be affected directly and unhappily by war conditions. Whatever the cause, the number of outstanding British biblical scholars has always been relatively small, though, it must be said in justice, their contributions have been of unusual significance. Today the unavoidable shifting of interest from what, for the moment, must necessarily be regarded as somewhat remote and purely academic research to more immediate, realistic considerations of military and economic necessity, and the inescapable loss, through the fortunes of war, of not a few potential biblical scholars, must mean inevitably that in Britain too, again at least for the next generation, Bible studies will decline in extent and ultimately in authority as well.

Sweden and Switzerland are carrying on responsibly. But their distinguished biblical scholars are necessarily few. Nor can they escape completely the effects of a torn and disorganized world and the circle of totalitarian influence which hems them in, not only materially, but also spiritually and intellectually.

It follows from all this that, for the present and the immediate future, America, i. e. the United States and Canada, must become the major center of biblical research, and that here Bible studies must be fostered wisely and devotedly, if biblical science is to endure and progress despite the present world-cataclysm. How prepared are we for this responsibility?

Let us realize at the outset that it is a responsibility which we assume of necessity, rather than of right. For we must face the bald fact that, despite a few scholars of very first rank, America's contribution to biblical research has scarcely been commensurate with the role which it has played in other fields of science. Until quite recently our nation has, not at all unnaturally, cherished a youthfully naive national philosophy, has been animated on the whole by a spirit of religious individualism and fundamentalism, and has directed its attention mainly to the content and techniques of simple, elementary Sunday School teaching of the Bible rather than to true research and

productive scholarship. American intellectual interests have turned more and more in the direction of the physical and social sciences and their pragmatic applications, rather than to the humanities. Much of our college training has been superficial, especially in the humanities, and our college students have been impatient of the exacting discipline indispensable to a firm foundation for constructive biblical scholarship. For these and other causes no doubt America's standards and achievements thus far in the field of biblical science have been comparatively modest.

In the crisis which now confronts our science, for we may truthfully call it a crisis, how prepared are we in America at this moment to assume the responsibility facing us? We have in our ranks a small handful of able and honored scholars, our links with a distinguished generation, whose scientific achievements, however, in the main now lie in the past rather than in the future, but who are still a source of guidance and inspiration to the rank and file of their colleagues. We have unquestionably a fair number of younger scholars of some achievement and of larger promise. But they work, for the most part, individually, without organization, unified purpose or cooperative endeavor, and with little more external stimulus than our annual sessions can offer. Opportunities for scientific publication are woefully few. Our intellectual clergy, who should provide an understanding and supporting public for biblical and theological studies, are today far more interested in sociological activities and the related scholarship. Our present American environment can scarcely be regarded as favorable to an adequate discharge of this new responsibility.

Is our Society any better prepared than its environment? Frankly, I doubt it. Now, in its sixty-second year and with more than six hundred members, we, its constituency, may, even with the best will in the world, hardly regard it as an altogether efficient organization. The Constitution provides that "the object of the Society shall be to stimulate critical study of the Scriptures by presenting, discussing and publishing original papers on biblical subjects." This was undoubtedly an adequate program for the Society in 1881 and even for a considerable

period thereafter. Today it is altogether too modest and narrow a goal.

Furthermore, the degree to which the Society is carrying out even this limited program and is promoting biblical science in America is open to serious inquiry and difference of opinion. Apparently the Society has but two major functions, viz. the holding of an annual meeting and the publication of a JOURNAL, both worthy projects indeed. But are they sufficient for a body of the age, size and dignity of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, especially when, as now, it is suddenly confronted with a responsibility grave and urgent?

And is the machinery of the Society adequate for its task? Recently Midwest and Canadian Branches of the Society have been formed, and only today we have learned of the organization of a Pacific Coast Branch. But these are, I believe, almost the only significant innovation in organization or procedure over a very long period. Despite the earnest labors of its patient and indefatigable Secretary and of its able and devoted Editor, its only officers who function with reasonable continuance, the Society seems to have mired itself in a steadily deepening rut, from which, but a little longer, it may never extricate itself.

It is surprising indeed that the Constitution makes no provision whatever for, and the Society therefore has no, standing committees, and especially no Committee on Research and Publication, which might function as its medium of contact with other learned bodies, no Committee on Membership and Resources and no Committee on Program.

The Secretary is expected to fashion an interesting and stimulating program for the annual meetings as best he may out of a conglomerate of papers, haphazardly offered by individual members of the Society, with almost no foreknowledge of the character and quality of that which is being offered, and with little discretionary authority to accept or reject. The programs of the various sessions of the annual meetings have but a minimum of unity, and the opportunity for discussion of important papers and themes is scanty indeed.

The meetings of the Society have been held, almost from time immemorial, here in New York City and in this one place, the



hospitality of which, while invariably sincere and generous, has naturally, through long and unbroken usage, lost something of its pristine spontaneity and become conventional and routine in character. The Society imparts, by its meetings, but little, if any, stimulus to the biblical scholarship of its environment; still less does it receive stimulus therefrom. Meeting in the same location year after year, with much the same membership in regular attendance, with the uniform routine of a hurried business session, in which practically no consideration can be given to the progress of the Society, and with an almost unchanging program of innumerable, loosely related papers, with virtually no discussion, with no planned opportunity for social contact and becoming better and more sympathetically acquainted with fellow-members and for exchange of information and ideas, small wonder that our annual meetings fail to stimulate as they should and to not a few of our members seem even empty and boring. I do not imply that these annual meetings are futile. I do say that they fall short of being all that they might and of achieving all that they should. A change of procedure, both with regard to selection of location of annual meetings and to more constructive preparation of programs seems greatly, even urgently, needed.

We may envisage a few of the specific services which the Society should inaugurate:

1. The launching of an agency and machinery for the publication of scientific studies, particularly monographs of size and compass too large for inclusion in the *JOURNAL* but too small to constitute each a complete volume.

2. Closer and more systematic cooperation with related institutions, such as, for example, the American Schools of Oriental Research and the American Council of Learned Societies.

3. The inauguration and coordination of important research projects, especially such as are of too large scope for individual effort, but which require the joint labors of a body of scholars in the administration of an approved, unified and supervised program.

4. The planning and preparation of authoritative, popular biblical studies, so that lay interest in the scientific investigation of the Bible may be stimulated.

5. The establishment at selected universities and seminaries, and especially at the American School for Oriental Research in Jerusalem, of fellowships for graduate study in the various provinces of biblical research, designed to promote the development of young scholars as teachers of authority.

We cannot and need not attempt, here and now, to foresee all possible services which SBLE might perform. These are merely suggestions. Other ideas, perhaps more practicable, valuable, and urgent, may well present themselves to other members of the Society. The all-important consideration is that we realize clearly and immediately the responsibility and the privilege which now fall to the lot of the Society, that it may arouse itself from its long lethargy and become once again alert and progressive.

From all this it is plain, I hope, that reorganization of the Society is advisable, even imperative. This reorganization should not be incidental and haphazard, but thoroughgoing. It should be based upon a searching study by a properly constituted commission of the Society's membership. It should not shrink from revision of the Constitution and from any and all steps, no matter how drastic, which this investigation may reveal to be necessary.

I have offered this paper somewhat reluctantly and with no negative purpose of mere expression of dissatisfaction or criticism. Rather, I have offered it out of a sense of duty and in a spirit of loyalty and affection, because I am jealous, intensely jealous, for the reputation of our Society and for the reputation of American scholarship and for the future of biblical science. My hope is that the entire membership of this Society may join with me in this jealousy. My thesis is that our science today faces a crisis, and that in this crisis a grave responsibility confronts our Society. It is my firm belief that, more than ever before in its entire history, SBLE has a task to perform of

gravest import, that it is at present inadequately organized to perform this task efficiently, and that there is therefore an urgent need for reorganization. This reorganization must, however, represent the conviction and the will of the entire membership of the Society. I shall feel that this paper will not have been in vain, that it will have achieved its full purpose, if there be sufficient approval of its general thesis to warrant a motion from the floor that a commission be appointed to consider the matter carefully and in all its implications and to present at a subsequent, preferably the next, annual meeting, a plan for an effective reorganization of the Society, in order to enable it to render a maximum service and to discharge, in a manner creditable in every way to American scholarship, its full responsibility to biblical science.