

A Perspective on the Trends and Challenges of Biblical Studies

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Before commenting upon the current state of biblical studies, I am compelled to address why a book roughly the size of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* warrants a field of study as vast as biblical studies.¹ Although overall the Hebrew Bible tells the religious and national history of ancient Israel, it is a collection of books—each with their own compositional history—that is edited over time. The twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible are as varied in genre as they are in historical orientation.² There are the myths of Genesis, as well as its patriarchal narratives, the royal annals of Samuel and Kings, the poetry of the prophets and the psalms, and the wisdom sayings of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. A scholar easily can focus attention on a particular book, genre, or historical period, addressing its literary form or its compositional and interpretive history. A scholar can also search for literary or linguistic cognates, and engage in comparative studies with other cultures, histories, and literatures of the ancient world. In this way, biblical studies expands beyond the confines of the Hebrew Bible to become a varied and rich field of study.

Despite the vastness of the discipline, biblical scholarship conforms broadly to three distinct types, each defined by a particular focus. Scholarship with an historical focus studies the world that produced the Bible. Scholarship with a textual focus addresses the text itself. Scholarship with an interpretive focus considers how the Bible has been read and understood over time, particularly within different religious traditions. Naturally, there is a great deal of cross-fertilization and overlapping concerns within these types of scholarship. A textual scholar can also be concerned with history, and may engage in Comparative Semitics and the dating of texts. An historical scholar could undertake a literary reading that notes how much or how little a text reflects historical reality. An interpretive scholar could mine biblical commentaries for more accurate understanding of words and insight into biblical passages. In fact, given how much remains unknown about the Bible and the world that produced it, it is arguably impossible, and perhaps irresponsible, for a biblical scholar to silo him/herself in any one inquiry of study without integrating the methods and findings of other inquiries into their work.³

Another essential divide in biblical scholarship at the moment is between the modernists and the postmodernists. In significant ways, biblical criticism is a product of modernism developed by figures such as Julius Wellhausen, Hermann Gunkel, John Bright, and Gerhard von Rad, who believed that the Bible's textual and contextual history could be revealed by applying scientific methods of inquiry to it. Modernist scholars use the tools of biblical scholarship to provide insight into the worlds that produced and compiled the Bible, as well as into the process through which

the text was transmitted. Postmodernism, which offers a shift in perspective which privileges subjectivity over objectivity, challenges basic assumptions about what can be known about any discipline, but poses particular challenges to biblical studies. Postmodern scholars dismiss the notion that there is a single, accessible, inherent meaning to a text (something readers of the Bible have assumed for centuries⁴), and contend that texts have multiple meanings and subtexts—hidden, sometimes conflicted, meanings embedded intentionally or unintentionally within a text. Under the weight of the postmodernist critique, Bible scholars cannot claim objectivity in their methods, nor can they proclaim the truth of their discoveries. They cannot maintain that they have access to the Bible's inherent truth, nor that such a truth exists. Postmodern Bible scholars embrace the multiplicity of meaning and seek to elucidate the subtexts in the Bible. They strive to understand ideologies that shape the biblical text, and look for ways in which the biblical text supports or challenges these ideologies.⁵

I provide this schematic of the field not only to introduce the discipline, but also to introduce myself. I consider myself to be a postmodernist Bible scholar who is text-centered, and who is engaged in literary interpretation with a particular focus on gender issues. I received my Ph.D. in 2005 from the Jewish Theological Seminary where I now teach undergraduate and graduate students, as well as rabbinical students. Though my training was secular, not religious, I contend that religious orientation and affiliation does matter in my field, since many biblical scholars train and teach in religious seminaries where the Hebrew Bible is a revered text. It should not be surprising that religion and politics affect biblical studies in ways and degrees spared other fields.⁶ As a good postmodernist, I recognize that it is impossible to disentwine completely my academic and personal relationship to the Hebrew Bible. In fact, one of the challenges to biblical studies I identify below is the difficulty in navigating the intersection between the university and the seminary—between the classroom where the Bible is studied, and the church or synagogue where it is worshipped.

I offer now a few comments on the state of the field from my perspective as a postmodern, literary, and gender scholar. From where I sit, the field looks strong, inviting, and healthfully evolving. It demonstrates an ability to engage with new ideas and to adapt to current academic trends. Feminist biblical studies may have morphed into the more elastic gender studies, but attention still remains upon the biblical representation of women,⁷ and, from a more modernist perspective, on the reconstruction of women's lives in the ancient world.⁸ Though women still command interest, masculinity studies has taken off in recent years, paying close attention to the biblical characteristics and behaviors of manhood.⁹ My own work provides a good indication of what postmodern, gender, and literary scholars like myself currently are engaged in. Building on masculinity studies, as well as the influx of queer theory to biblical studies,¹⁰ I am examining biblical texts that challenge the Bible's conventional gender norms by presenting characters that embody characteristics and behaviors associated with the opposite gender.

As I mention above, biblical studies has always been interdisciplinary—relying heavily on the work done by historians, archeologists and philologists of the ancient world. In particular, literary interpreters, like myself, adopt various interpretive lenses from other disciplines, like queer theory or film theory, and apply them to biblical studies.¹¹ There has been a recent wave of interest in disability studies, as scholars have considered how the Bible relates to bodies that deviate from its concept of an ideal body,¹² and even more recently, in food studies, as scholars address the religious, social, and economic impact of food and food symbolism.¹³ Trauma studies also has made significant inroads into biblical studies as more and more scholars perceive the Bible as a literary response to the trauma of exile.¹⁴ The intersection between biblical studies and any one of these theoretical lenses—whether queer, trauma, disability, or food—reflects contemporary social realities and concerns. Twenty-first century anxieties related to gender identity, terrorism, or ecological sustainability, have made their way into biblical studies. Some modernist Bible scholars may find the integration of theory from other disciplines to be distracting, if not anachronistic, to the biblical world. I contend that the integration is testament to the Bible’s literary quality, and is in keeping with its interpretive traditions, since, for centuries, the Bible has been read through various cultural lenses. Above all, the elasticity with which biblical studies can absorb theories from other disciplines is essential to its relevance and to its future. It is the means through which new scholars gain access, and an ancient book is made relevant for its secular and religious readers.

Speaking as a postmodern, literary, gender Bible scholar, overall, I feel optimistic about the future of biblical studies, and my place within it. Admittedly, a modernist Bible scholar may offer a different and bleaker perspective, lamenting how classical modes of study are no longer in vogue. Despite my optimism, I close by addressing challenges facing the field, which I perceive even from my vantage point. I experience an increasing generation divide between those who are trained classically, and whose scholarship relies upon the tools gained in the process, and those, like myself who engage in more theoretically driven scholarship—in other words, between the modernist and the postmodernist scholars. Certainly, biblical scholarship has changed over the years to accommodate the cultural shift to postmodernism, but more importantly to the field, I argue, is the ways in which Bible scholars have changed. A few generations ago, the typical Bible scholar was white, male, and Christian. Now, Bible scholars represent a variety of races, religions, ethnicities and gender identities. This generation of Bible scholars identified the biased ideology of their predecessors, perhaps much to their chagrin, and introduced a multiplicity of perspectives into the field, as well as an appreciation for this multiplicity. The question now is how to speak across this generation divide, to enable cross-fertilization, and to foster genuine appreciation for all the work being done.

A related challenge is the tension felt within the field between the academic and the religious communities who train its scholars, and who produce and consume its scholarship. When applying to graduate schools years ago, I was advised not to attend a seminary, which was seen as a bastion

of subjective religious sentiment, but rather to attend a secular university. I chose to attend a liberal Jewish seminary, one that trains rabbis and scholars, because I embraced its subjectivity, and believed it would provide me with excellent training as a scholar. I have not regretted my decision. Now, as a professor at this seminary, I strive to model for my students the ways in which the secular and the religious perspectives can coexist in a healthy and productive tension.

Not every scholar has to nor should embrace my perspective. There are many scholars who are not part of religious communities, and who approach the Bible purely as a cultural artifact. Let me be clear: I do not think that biblical studies *only* belongs in the seminary. But I also do not think it is possible or desirable for biblical scholarship to separate fully from religious communities, both for pragmatic and for idealistic reasons. Pragmatic reasons are clear. Religious communities provide Bible scholars with an audience, with students, and with places of employment. Biblical studies is one of the rare disciplines that has an educated lay audience, not unlike the audience that enjoys popular science. This audience attends lectures and buys books. We scholars need them, and should value them because religious communities give biblical studies a future, and shield it from the threat of becoming irrelevant like so many other disciplines that fall within the humanities.

The idealistic reasons for encouraging a relationship between the secular and the religious communities that engage in and appreciate biblical studies may be less clear. I contend that the relationship between Bible scholars and religious communities is mutually beneficial. Bible scholars educate religious communities about the texts they hold sacred, thereby enriching their understanding of these texts, and, at times, complicating their relationship to it. As a scholar who educates and complicates, I have only experienced appreciation from the communities in which I teach. I have found that people appreciate learning more about their sacred texts, and that their relationship to these texts even can be enhanced when complicated. Bible scholars may challenge religious communities, but religious communities also challenge Bible scholars by forcing us to engage with texts, and to consider their value a part from academic discourse. For example, having first identified and analyzed texts that depict violence against women, feminist Bible scholars like Susanne Scholz now consider how to integrate these disturbing texts into contemporary religious communities in ways that do not white-wash their violence.¹⁵ In this way, religious communities not only *enable* Bible scholars to remain relevant, they *force* us to be relevant.

From my corner of biblical studies, I feel optimistic about its future. It is a field that continues to adapt and to grow, and that generates new scholars and scholarship, and a new audience for both. My hope is that scholars be open to various modes of scholarship, and to not be dismissive of scholars that practice differently, or that teach and train within religious communities. I also urge scholars whether religious or not, whether modern or postmodern, to own their perspectives, and to teach and write openly from that perspective. Doing so keeps us vital, ensures our future, and makes us stronger.

Notes

1. The Society of Biblical Literature, the professional guild of biblical studies, counts 8,374 members in 2014.
2. Different traditions divide and order the books differently, and some, like the Roman Catholic or the Greek Orthodox, include additional books within their canon.
3. For a discussion of the various methods of biblical interpretation, see Barton 1984.
4. The certainty that a text contains an inherent meaning is what A. K. M. Adam terms the “myth of subsistent meaning”; he writes: “The widely held myth of subsistent meaning treats “meaning” as an immanent property of a text. A text has meaning as a quality independent of particular readers and particular circumstances.” See Adam 2006, 3.
5. John J. Collins considers the impact of postmodernism on biblical studies in Collins 2005. For a current discussion on the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in biblical studies see the *JBL* Forum 2014.
6. Since the Hebrew Bible is a foundational religious text for Christians and Jews, the impact of religion on biblical studies is expected. Politics also plays a role, especially when scholars consider the national origins of Israel, and Israel’s connection to the land. See Finkelstein 2007.
7. See Kalmanofsky 2014.
8. See Ebeling 2010; Meyers 2013; and Hamori 2015.
9. See Creangă 2010.
10. See Stone 2005 and Macwilliam 2011.
11. My first book used film theory on the horror genre to understand how the biblical prophets worked to horrify their audience into reform. See Kalmanofsky 2008.
12. See Schipper 2006.
13. See Stone 2005. Concurrent with my writing this essay, Professor Brigitte Kahl is teaching a course entitled “Idol Meat and Vegetables: Towards a Biblical/New testament Theology of Food” at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.
14. See O’Connor 2010.

15. See Scholz 2010.

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