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THE ETHICS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: DECENTERING BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP*

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It is a commonplace that presidential addresses have primarily rhetorical functions. They are a ceremonial form of speech that does not invite responsive questions nor questioning responses. Such presidential rhetoric is generally of two sorts: either it addresses a particular exegetical, archaeological, or historical problem, or it seeks to reflect on the status of the field by raising organizational, hermeneutical, or methodological questions. The latter type sometimes attempts to chart the paradigm shifts or decentering processes in biblical scholarship which displace the dominant ethos of research but do not completely replace it or make it obsolete.

Almost eighty years ago, in his presidential address entitled "The Bearing of Historical Studies on the Religious Use of the Bible," Frank Porter of Yale University charted three such shifts: (1) The first stage, out of which biblical scholarship had just emerged, was the stage in which the book's records are imposed upon the present as an external authority. (2) The second stage, through which biblical scholarship was passing in 1908, was that of historical science, which brings deliverance from dogmatic bondage and teaches us to view the past as past, biblical history like other histories, and the Bible like other books. (3) Porter envisioned a third stage "at which, while the rights and achievements of historical criticism are freely accepted, the power that lives in the book is once more felt."¹ He likens this third stage to the reading of great books, whose greatness does not consist in their accuracy as records of facts, but depends chiefly on their symbolic power to transfigure the facts of human experience and reality. In the past fifteen years or so, biblical studies has followed Parker's lead and adopted insights and methods derived from literary studies² and philosophical hermeneutics; but

* The Presidential Address delivered 5 December 1987 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Copley Marriott Hotel, Boston, MA.

¹ Frank C. Porter, "The Bearing of Historical Studies on the Religious Use of the Bible," *HTR* 2 (1909) 276.

² Amos N. Wilder articulated this literary-aesthetic paradigm as rhetorical. See his SBL presidential address, "Scholars, Theologians, and Ancient Rhetoric," 75 (1956) 1-11 and his book *Early*

it has, to a great extent, refused to relinquish its rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism.

This third literary-hermeneutical paradigm seems presently in the process of decentering into a fourth paradigm that inaugurates a rhetorical-ethical turn. This fourth paradigm relies on the analytical and practical tradition of rhetoric in order to insist on the public-political responsibility of biblical scholarship. It seeks to utilize both theories of rhetoric and the rhetoric of theories in order to display how biblical texts and their contemporary interpretations involve authorial aims and strategies, as well as audience perceptions and constructions, as political and religious discursive practices. This fourth paradigm seeks to engender a self-understanding of biblical scholarship as communicative praxis. It rejects the misunderstanding of rhetoric as stylistic ornament, technical skills or linguistic manipulation, and maintains not only "that rhetoric is epistemic but also that epistemology and ontology are themselves rhetorical."³ Biblical interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions.

Since the sociohistorical location of rhetoric is the public of the *polis*, the rhetorical paradigm shift situates biblical scholarship in such a way that its public character and political responsibility become an integral part of our literary readings and historical reconstructions of the biblical world. "The turn to rhetoric" that has engendered critical theory in literary, historical, political and social studies fashions a theoretical context for such a paradigm shift in biblical studies.⁴ Critical theory, reader response criticism, and poststructuralist analysis,⁵ as well as the insight into the rhetorical character

Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

³ Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 85. See also, e.g., J. Nelson, A. Megills, D. McCloskey, eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Ricca Edmondson, *Rhetoric in Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John S. Nelson, "Political Theory as Political Rhetoric," in *What Should Political Theory Be Now?* (ed. J. S. Nelson; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) 169–240.

⁴ See my article "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in I Corinthians," *NTS* 33 (1987) 386–403 and Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" *CBQ* 49 (1987) 448–63 for further literature.

⁵ For bringing together the insights of this paper I have found especially helpful the works of feminist literary and cultural criticism. See, e.g., S. Benhabib and D. Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987); Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986); E. A. Flynn and P. P. Schweickart, eds., *Gender and Reading: Essays on Reader, Texts, and Contexts* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); G. Greene and C. Kaplan, eds., *Making*

and linguisticity of all historiography, represent the contemporary revival of ancient rhetoric.

The ethics of reading which respects the rights of the text and assumes that the text being interpreted “may say something different from what one wants or expects it to say,”⁶ is highly developed in biblical studies. Therefore, I will focus here on the ethics of biblical scholarship as an institutionalized academic practice. I will approach the topic by marking my present rhetorical situation as a “connected critic”⁷ who speaks from a marginal location and that of an engaged position. Then I will explore the rhetoric of SBL presidential addresses with respect to the shift from a scientific antiquarian to a critical-political ethos of biblical scholarship. Finally, I will indicate what kind of communicative practice such a shift implies.

I. SOCIAL LOCATION AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM

In distinction to formalist literary criticism, a critical theory of rhetoric insists that context is as important as text. What we see depends on where we stand. One’s social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts. My own rhetorical situation is marked by what Virginia Woolf, in her book *Three Guineas*, has characterized as the “outsider’s view”:

It is a solemn sight always—a procession like a caravanserai crossing a desert. Great-grandfather, grandfathers, fathers, uncles—they all went that way wearing their gowns, wearing their wigs, some with ribbons across their breasts, others without. One was a bishop. Another a judge. One was an admiral. Another a general. One was a professor. Another a doctor. . . . But now for the past twenty years or so, it is no longer a sight merely, a photograph . . . at which we can look with merely an esthetic appreciation. For there, trapesing along at the tail end of the procession, we go ourselves. And that makes a difference.⁸

a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism (New York: Methuen, 1983); Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); J. Newton and D. Rosenfelt, eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (New York: Methuen, 1985); M. Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985); Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1987).

⁶ J. Hillis Miller, “Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base,” *PMLA* 102 (1987) 284.

⁷ Michael Walzer characterizes the “connected critic” as follows: “Amos prophecy is social criticism because it challenges the leaders, the conventions, the ritual practices of a particular society and because it does so in the name of values shared and recognized in that same society” (*Interpretation and Social Criticism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987] 89).

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966) 61.

Almost from its beginning women scholars have joined the procession of American biblical scholars.⁹ In 1889, not quite one hundred years ago, Anna Rhoads Ladd became the first female member of this Society. Ten years later, in 1899, Mary Emma Woolley, since 1895 chair of the Department of Biblical History, Literature and Exegesis at Wellesley College, and from 1900 to 1937 President of Mount Holyoke College, is listed in attendance at the annual meeting. In 1913 Professor Eleanor D. Wood presented a paper on biblical archaeology, and in 1917 Professor Louise Pettibone Smith, who also served later in 1950–51 as secretary of the Society, was the first woman to publish an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Mary J. Hussy of Mount Holyoke College had held the post of treasurer already in 1924–1926. At the crest of the first wave of American feminism, women's membership in 1920 was around 10 percent. Afterwards it steadily declined until it achieved a low of 3.5 percent in 1970. Presently the Society does not have a data base sufficient to compute the percentage of its white women and minority members.

The second wave of the women's movement made itself felt at the annual meeting in 1971, when the Women's Caucus in Religious Studies was organized, whose first co-chairs were Professor Carol Christ of AAR and myself of SBL. A year later, at the International Congress of Learned Societies in Los Angeles, the Caucus called for representation of women on the various boards and committees of the Society, the anonymous submission and evaluation of manuscripts for *JBL*, and the establishment of a job registry through CSR. At the business meeting two women were elected to the council and one to the executive board. Fifteen years later, I am privileged to inaugurate what will, it is hoped, be a long line of women presidents, consisting not only of white women but also of women of color,¹⁰ who are woefully underrepresented in the discipline. The historic character of this moment is cast into relief when one considers that in Germany not a single woman has achieved the rank of ordinary professor in one of the established Roman Catholic theological faculties.

However, the mere admission of women into the ranks of scholarship and the various endeavors of the Society does not necessarily assure that biblical scholarship is done in the interest and from the perspective of women or others marginal to the academic enterprise. Historian Dorothy

⁹ For the following information, see Dorothy C. Bass, "Women's Studies and Biblical Studies: An Historical Perspective," *JSOT* 22 (1982) 6–12; Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 70, 83f.; and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "American Women and the Bible: The Nature of Woman as a Hermeneutical Issue," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. A. Yarbro Collins; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 11–33.

¹⁰ To my knowledge only one Afro-American and one Asian-American woman have yet received a doctorate in biblical studies.

Bass, to whom we owe most of our information about women's historical participation in the SBL, has pointed to a critical difference between the women of the last century who, as scholars, joined the Society and those women who sought for a scientific investigation of the Bible in the interest of women.¹¹ Feminist biblical scholarship has its roots not in the academy but in the social movements for the emancipation of slaves and of freeborn women. Against the assertion that God has sanctioned the system of slavery and intended the subordination of women,¹² the Grimké sisters, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and others distinguished between the oppressive anti-Christian traditions of men and the life-giving intentions of God. Many reformers of the nineteenth century shared the conviction that women must learn the original languages of Greek and Hebrew in order to produce unbiased translations and interpretations faithful to the original divine intentions of the Bible. Nineteenth-century feminists were well aware that higher biblical criticism provided a scholarly grounding of their arguments. Women's rights leaders such as Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the most explicit in calling on women to learn the methods of higher biblical criticism in order to critique patriarchal religion.

Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the editorial committee of the *Woman's Bible* sought to utilize the insights and methods of "higher criticism" for interpreting the biblical texts on women, no alliance between feminist biblical interpretation and historical-critical scholarship was forged in the nineteenth century. Cady Stanton had invited distinguished women scholars "versed in biblical criticism" to contribute to the *Woman's Bible* project. But her invitation was declined because—as she states—"they were afraid that their high reputation and scholarly attainments might be compromised."¹³ This situation continued well into the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1920s Rev. Lee Anna Starr and Dr. Katherine Bushnell, both outside the profession, used their knowledge of biblical languages and higher criticism to analyze the status of women in the Bible and the theological bases for women's role in scripture.¹⁴

¹¹ Bass, "Women's Studies," 10–11.

¹² Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Biblical Arguments and Women's Place in the Church," in *The Bible And Social Reform* (ed. E. R. Sandeen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 85–104; For Jarena Lee, see William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

¹³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ed., *The Original Feminist Attack on the Bible: The Woman's Bible* (1895, 1898; facsimile ed. New York: Arno, 1974) 1. 9; see also Elaine C. Huber, "They weren't Prepared to Hear: A Closer Look at the Woman's Bible," *ANQ* 16 (1976) 271–76 and Anne McGrew Bennett et al., "The Woman's Bible: Review and Perspectives," in *Women and Religion: 1973 Proceedings* (Tallahassee: AAR, 1973) 39–78.

¹⁴ Lee Anna Starr, *The Bible Status of Women* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1926); Katherine C. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Woman's Place in the Divine Economy* (1923; reissued by Ray Munson, North Collins, NY).

The androcentric character of biblical texts and interpretations was not addressed by a woman scholar until 1964 when Margaret Brackenbury Crook, a longstanding member of the SBL and professor of Biblical Literature at Smith College, published *Women and Religion*.¹⁵ Although Brackenbury Crook repeatedly claimed that she did not advocate feminism or animosity toward men but that as a scholar she was simply stating the facts on the basis of evidence, she did so in order to insist that the masculine monopoly in biblical religions must be broken and that women must participate in shaping religious thought, symbols, and traditions.

In the context of the women's movements in the seventies and eighties, women scholars have not only joined the procession of educated men but have also sought to do so in the interest of women. We no longer deny our feminist engagement for the sake of scholarly acceptance. Rather we celebrate tonight the numerous feminist publications, papers, and monographs of SBL members that have not only enhanced our knowledge about women in the biblical worlds but have also sought to change our methods of reading and reconstruction, as well as our hermeneutical perspectives and scholarly assumptions. The Women in the Biblical World Section has since 1981 consistently raised issues of method and hermeneutics that are of utmost importance for the wider Society.

And yet, whether and how much our work has made serious inroads in biblical scholarship remain to be seen. The following anecdote can highlight what I mean. I am told that after I had been elected president of the Society a journalist asked one of the leading officers of the organization whether I had been nominated because the Society wanted to acknowledge not only my active participation in its ongoing work but also my theoretical contributions both to the reconstruction of Christian origins and to the exploration of a critical biblical hermeneutic and rhetoric.¹⁶ He reacted with surprise at such a suggestion and assured her that I was elected because my work on the book of Revelation proved me to be a solid and serious scholar.

Interpretive communities such as the SBL are not just scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities. They possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, to foster or to restrict membership, to recognize and to define what "true scholarship" entails. The question today is no longer whether women should join the procession of educated men, but under what conditions we can do so. What kind of ethos, ethics, and politics of the community of biblical scholars would allow us to move our work done in "the interest of women" from the margins to the center of biblical studies?

¹⁵ Margaret Brackenbury Crook, *Women and Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); see also Elsie Thomas Culver, *Women in the World of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

¹⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); idem, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

I hasten to say that I do not want to be misunderstood as advocating a return to a precritical reading and facile application of biblical texts on and about *Woman*. Rather I am interested in decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship by recentering it in a critical interpretive praxis for liberation. Ethos is the shared intellectual space of freely accepted obligations and traditions as well as the praxial space of discourse and action.¹⁷ Since ethos shapes our scholarly behavior and attitudes, it needs to be explored more explicitly in terms of its rhetorical aims, which seek to affect a common orientation among its practitioners. The rhetoric of previous addresses of SBL presidents can serve as a text for engaging us in a critical reflection on the ethos as well as the rhetorical aims of biblical studies.

II. THE RHETORIC OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Only a few presidential addresses have reflected on their own political contexts and rhetorical strategies. If my research assistant is correct,¹⁸ in the past forty years, no president of SBL has used the opportunity of the presidential address for asking the membership to consider the political context of their scholarship and to reflect on its public accountability. Since 1947 no presidential address has explicitly reflected on world politics, global crises, human sufferings, or movements for change. Neither the civil rights movement nor the various liberation struggles of the so-called Third World, neither the assassination of Martin Luther King nor the Holocaust has become the rhetorical context for biblical studies. Biblical studies appears to have progressed in a political vacuum, and scholars seem to have understood themselves as accountable solely—as Robert Funk puts it—to the vested interests of the “fraternity of scientifically trained scholars with the soul of a church.”¹⁹ This ethos of American biblical scholarship after 1947 is anticipated in the following letter of R. Bultmann written in 1926:

Of course the impact of the war has led many people to revise their concepts of human existence; but I must confess that that has not been so in my case. . . . So I do not believe that the war has influenced my theology. My view is that if anyone is looking for the genesis of our theology he [*sic*] will find, that internal discussion with the theology of our teachers plays

¹⁷ See Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 179–214.

¹⁸ I want to thank Ann Millin, Episcopal Divinity School, for checking SBL presidential addresses for references to and reflections of their political contexts as well as Margret Hutaff, Harvard Divinity School, for proofreading the manuscript. I am also indebted to Francis Schüssler Fiorenza for his critical reading of several drafts of this paper.

¹⁹ Robert Funk, “The Watershed of The American Biblical Tradition: The Chicago School, First Phase, 1892–1920,” *JBL* 95 (1976) 7.

an incomparably greater role than the impact of the war or reading Dostoevsky [*sic*].²⁰

My point here is not an indictment of Bultmann, who more than many others was aware that presupposition-less exegesis is not possible nor desirable. Rather, it allows me to raise the question: Does the immanent discourse between teachers and students, between academic fathers and sons—or daughters for that matter—between different schools of interpretation jeopardize the intellectual rigor of the discipline? Do we ask and teach our students to ask in a disciplined way how our scholarship is conditioned by its social location and how it serves political functions?

In his 1945 address, President Enslin of Crozer Theological Seminary ironizes the British snobbishness of Sir Oliver Lodge, who thought that the only American worth speaking to was Henry Cabot Lodge.²¹ He nevertheless unwittingly supports such a scholarly in-house discourse by advocating an immersion in the works of the great scholars of the past while at the same time excoriating the “demand for the practical in biblical research.” He rejects the requirement that biblical research “strengthen faith and provide blueprints for modern conduct” as one and the same virus which has poisoned German scholarship and made it liable to Nazi ideology. He therefore argues that biblical critics must be emotionally detached, intellectually dispassionate, and rationally value-neutral. Critical detachment is an achievement that turns the critic into a lonely hero who has to pay a price in comfort and solidarity. However, Enslin does not consider that this scholarly ethos of dispassionate industry, eternal questioning, utter loneliness, detached inquiry, patient toil without practical results, and the unhampered pursuit of truth “under the direction of men [*sic*] whom students can trust and revere” could be the more dangerous part of the same political forgetfulness that in his view has poisoned German biblical scholarship.

This scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry insists that the biblical critic needs to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life and stresses the alien character of biblical materials. What makes biblical interpretation possible is radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and

²⁰ Letter to Erich Förster, pastor and professor in Frankfurt, as quoted by Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968) 9–10; See also Dorothe Soelle, “Rudolf Bultmann und die Politische Theologie,” in *Rudolf Bultmann: 100 Jahre* (ed. H Thyen; Oldenburger Vorträge; Oldenburg: H. Holzberg, 1985) 69ff.; and Dieter Georgi, “Rudolf Bultmann’s Theology of the New Testament Revisited,” in *Bultmann Retrospect and Prospect: The Centenary Symposium at Wellesley* (ed. E. C. Hobbs; HTS 35; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 82ff.

²¹ Morton S. Enslin, “The Future of Biblical Studies,” *JBL* 65 (1946) 1–12; Already Julian Morgenstern had argued “that in Germany biblical science is doomed.” Since in Europe Biblical Studies are in decline, North America, i.e., the U.S. and Canada “must become the major center of biblical research” (“The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis,” *JBL* 61 [1942] 4–5).

political distancing. Disinterested and dispassionate scholarship enables biblical critics to enter the minds and world of historical people, to step out of their own time and to study history on its own terms, unencumbered by contemporary questions, values, and interests. A-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the rhetorical postures that seem to be dominant in the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship. The decentering of this rhetoric of disinterestedness and presupposition-free exegesis seeks to recover the political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility.

The “scientist” ethos of biblical studies was shaped by the struggle of biblical scholarship to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical controls. It corresponded to the professionalization of academic life and the rise of the university. Just as history as an academic discipline sought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to prove itself as an objective science in analogy to the natural sciences, so also did biblical studies. Scientific history sought to establish facts objectively free from philosophical considerations. It was determined to hold strictly to facts and evidence, not to sermonize or moralize but to tell the simple historic truth—in short, to narrate things as they actually happened.²² Historical science was a technique that applied critical methods to the evaluation of sources, which in turn are understood as data and evidence. The mandate to avoid theoretical considerations and normative concepts in the immediate encounter with the text is to assure that the resulting historical accounts would be free of ideology.

In this country, Ranke was identified as the father of “the true historical method,” which eschewed all theoretical reflection. Ranke became for many American scholars the prototype of the nontheoretical and the politically neutral historian, although Ranke himself sought to combine theoretically his historical method with his conservative political views.²³ This positivist nineteenth-century understanding of historiography as a science was the theoretical context for the development of biblical scholarship in the academy. Since the ethos of objective scientism and theoretical value-neutrality was articulated in the political context of several heresy trials at the turn of the twentieth century, its rhetoric continues to reject all overt theological and religious institutional engagement as unscientific, while at the same time claiming a name and space marked by the traditional biblical canon. Such a scientist posture of historical research is, however, not displaced when it is decentered by an objectivist stance that arrogates the methodological formalism of literary or sociological science. The pretension

²² George G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (rev. ed.; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983) 64.

²³ Robert A. Oden, Jr., “Hermeneutics and Historiography: Germany and America,” in *SBL 1980 Seminar Papers* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980) 135–57.

of biblical studies to “scientific” modes of inquiry that deny their hermeneutical and theoretical character and mask their historical-social location prohibits a critical reflection on their rhetorical theological practices in their sociopolitical contexts.

Although the dominant ethos of biblical studies in this century seems to have been that which is paradigmatically expressed in Bultmann’s letter and Enslin’s address, there have nevertheless also been presidential voices that have challenged this self-understanding of biblical scholarship. Already in 1919, James Montgomery of the University of Pennsylvania had launched a scathing attack on the professed detachment of biblical scholars when addressing the Society:

We academics flatter ourselves on what we call our pure science and think we are the heirs of an eternal possession abstracted from the vicissitudes of time. We recall Archimedes working out his mathematical problems under the dagger of the assassin, or Goethe studying Chinese during the battle of Jena. But we dare not in this day take comfort in those academic anecdotes nor desire to liken ourselves to the monastic scholars who pursued their studies and meditations in their cells undisturbed by the wars raging without. . . .²⁴

Almost twenty years later, at the eve of World War II, Henry Cadbury of Harvard University discussed in his presidential address the motives for the changes in biblical scholarship. He observed that most members of the Society are horrified by the perversions of learning and prostitutions of scholarship to partisan propagandistic ends in Nazi Germany. He noted, however, that at the same time most members are not equally aware of the public responsibility of their own scholarship and of the social consequences of their research. He therefore challenged the membership to become aware of the moral and spiritual needs in contemporary life and to take responsibility for the social and spiritual functions of biblical scholarship.²⁵

At the end of World War II, Leroy Waterman of the University of Michigan also called in his address for the sociopublic responsibility of scholarship. Biblical scholarship must be understood as situated in a morally unstable world tottering on the brink of atomic annihilation. Students of the Bible should therefore take note of the deep moral confusion in their world situation and at the same time make available “any pertinent resources within their own keeping.” While biblical scholars cannot forsake their research in “order to peddle their wares,” they also cannot remain in the ivory tower “of privileged aloofness.”

Waterman argued that biblical studies and natural science have in common the “claim to seek truth in complete objectivity without regard to

²⁴ James A. Montgomery, “Present Tasks of American Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 38 (1919) 2.

²⁵ Henry J. Cadbury, “Motives of Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 56 (1937) 1–16.

consequences.”²⁶ But biblical scholarship and natural science sharply diverge with respect to their public influence. Whereas science has cultivated a public that is aware of the improvements science can effect for the increase of human welfare or its destruction, biblical scholarship has taken for granted the public influence of the Bible in Western culture. Therefore, it has cultivated as its public not society as a whole but organized religion, “whose dominant leadership has been more concerned with the defense of the status quo than with any human betterment accruing from new religious insights.”²⁷ The task of biblical studies in this situation is therefore to make available to humanity on the brink of atomic annihilation the moral resources and ethical directives of biblical religions. At the eve of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit on nuclear arms reduction, Waterman’s summons of the Society to public responsibility is still timely.

III. THE ETHOS OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP: CRITICAL RHETORIC AND ETHICS

Although I agree with his summons to public responsibility, I do not share his optimistic view of positivist science. The reluctance of the discipline to reflect on its sociopolitical location cannot simply be attributed, as Waterman does, to the repression of biblical scholarship by organized religion. It is as much due to its ethos of scientist positivism and professed value-neutrality. Scientist epistemologies covertly advocate an a-political reality without assuming responsibility for their political assumptions and interests. “Scientism has pretensions to a mode of inquiry that tries to deny its own hermeneutic character and mask its own historicity so that it might claim a historical certainty.”²⁸

Critical theory of rhetoric or discursive practices, as developed in literary, political, and historical studies, seeks to decenter the objectivist and depoliticized ethos of biblical studies with an ethos of rhetorical inquiry that could engage in the formation of a critical historical and religious consciousness. The reconceptualization of biblical studies in rhetorical rather than scientist terms would provide a research framework not only for integrating historical, archaeological, sociological, literary, and theological approaches as perspectival readings of texts but also for raising ethical-political and religious-theological questions as constitutive of the interpretive process. A rhetorical hermeneutic does not assume that the text is a window to historical reality, nor does it operate with a correspondence theory of truth. It does not understand historical sources as data and evidence but sees them

²⁶ Leroy Waterman, “Biblical Studies in a New Setting,” *JBL* 66 (1947) 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 31.

as perspectival discourse constructing their worlds and symbolic universes.²⁹

Since alternative symbolic universes engender competing definitions of the world, they cannot be reduced to one meaning. Therefore, competing interpretations of texts are not simply either right or wrong,³⁰ but they constitute different ways of reading and constructing historical meaning. Not detached value-neutrality but an explicit articulation of one's rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria, theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and sociopolitical locations for critical public discussion are appropriate in such a rhetorical paradigm of biblical scholarship.

The rhetorical understanding of discourse as creating a world of pluriform meanings and a pluralism of symbolic universes, raises the question of power. How is meaning constructed? Whose interests are served? What kind of worlds are envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? Which social-political practices are legitimated? Or which communities of discourse sign responsible? Such and similar questions become central to the interpretive task. Once biblical scholarship begins to talk explicitly of social interests, whether of race, gender, culture, or class, and once it begins to recognize the need for a sophisticated and pluralistic reading of texts that questions the fixity of meaning, then a *double ethics* is called for.

An *ethics of historical reading* changes the task of interpretation from finding out "what the text meant" to the question of what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical contexts. Although such an ethics is aware of the pluralism of historical- and literary-critical methods as well as the pluralism of interpretations appropriate to the text, it nevertheless insists that the number of interpretations that can legitimately be given to a text are limited. Such a historical reading seeks to give the text its due by asserting its original meanings over and against later dogmatic usurpations. It makes the assimilation of the text to our own experience and interests more difficult and thereby keeps alive the "irritation" of the original text by challenging our own assumptions, world views, and practices. In short, the methods of historical- and literary-critical scholarship and its diachronic reconstructions distance us in such a way from the original texts and their historical symbolic worlds that they relativize not only them but also us. By illuminating the ethical-political dimensions of the biblical text in its historical contexts, such an *ethics of historical reading* allows us not only to relativize through contextualization the values and authority claims of the biblical text but also to assess and critically evaluate them.

²⁹ See the discussion of scientific theory choice by Linda Alcoff, "Justifying Feminist Social Science," *Hypatia* 2 (1987)107-27.

³⁰ Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 150.

The rhetorical character of biblical interpretations and historical reconstructions, moreover, requires, an *ethics of accountability* that stands responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings. If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then biblical scholarship must take the responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values. If the Bible has become a classic of Western culture because of its normativity, then the responsibility of the biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving “the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions” of the biblical writers.³¹ It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary sociopolitical contexts.

Just as literary critics have called for an interpretive evaluation of classic works of art in terms of justice, so students of the Bible must learn how to examine both the rhetorical aims of biblical texts and the rhetorical interests emerging in the history of interpretation or in contemporary scholarship. This requires that we revive a responsible ethical and political criticism which recognizes the ideological distortions of great works of religion. Such discourse does not just evaluate the ideas or propositions of a work but also seeks to determine whether its very language and composition promote stereotypical images and linguistic violence. What does the language of a biblical text “do” to a reader who submits to its world of vision?³²

In order to answer this question, the careful reading of biblical texts and the appropriate reconstruction of their historical worlds and of their symbolic universes need to be complemented by a theological discussion of the contemporary religious functions of biblical texts which claim scriptural authority today in biblical communities of faith. To open up biblical texts and the historical reconstructions of their worlds for public discussion requires that students learn to traverse not only the boundaries of theological disciplines but also those of other intellectual disciplines.³³

To enable students to do so, biblical studies will have to overcome the institutionalized dichotomy between graduate training in the university and ministerial education in schools of theology. M.A. and Ph.D. students

³¹ Krister Stendahl, “The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 10.

³² See Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” in *The Politics of Interpretation* (ed. J. T. Mitchell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 51–82.

³³ See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical and Practical Task,” *Theological Education* 23 (1987) 113–41.

interested in teaching in seminaries and church-related schools are to become skilled in critical-theological reflection just as M.Div. and D.Min. students should be versed in the analysis of religion and culture. Moreover, in view of the insistence that all professions and research institutions should become conscious of the values they embody and the interests they serve, students in religious studies as well as in Theology must learn to engage in a disciplined reflection on the societal and public values³⁴ promoted by their intellectual disciplines.

Finally, the growth of right-wing political fundamentalism and of biblicist literalism in society, religious institutions, and the broader culture feeds antidemocratic authoritarianism and fosters personal prejudice. In the light of this political situation, biblical scholarship has the responsibility to make its research available to a wider public. Since literalist biblical fundamentalism asserts the public claims and values of biblical texts, biblical scholarship can no longer restrict its public to institutionalized religions and to the in-house discourse of the academy. Rather, biblical scholarship must acknowledge the continuing political influence of the Bible in Western culture and society.

If biblical studies continues to limit its educational communicative practices to students preparing for the professional pastoral ministry and for academic posts in theological schools, it forgoes the opportunity to foster a critical biblical culture and a pluralistic historical consciousness. Therefore, the Society should provide leadership as to how to make our research available to all those who are engaged in the communication of biblical knowledge, who have to confront biblical fundamentalism in their professions, and especially to those who have internalized their oppression through a literalist reading of the Bible. Such a different public location of biblical discourse requires that the Society actively scrutinize its communicative practices and initiate research programs and discussion forums that could address issues of biblical education and communication.

In conclusion: I have argued for a paradigm shift in the ethos and rhetorical practices of biblical scholarship. If religious studies becomes public deliberative discourse and rhetorical construction oriented toward the present and the future, then biblical studies becomes a critical reflection on the rhetorical practices encoded in the literatures of the biblical world and their social or ecclesial functions today. Such a critical-rhetorical paradigm requires that biblical studies continue its descriptive-analytic work utilizing all the critical methods available for illuminating our understanding of ancient texts and their historical location. At the same time, it engages biblical scholarship in a hermeneutic-evaluative discursive practice

³⁴ See also Ronald F. Thiemann, "Toward an American Public Theology: Religion in a Pluralistic Theology," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 18/1 (1987) 3-6, 10.

exploring the power/knowledge relations inscribed in contemporary biblical discourse and in the biblical texts themselves.

Such an approach opens up the rhetorical practices of biblical scholarship to the critical inquiry of all the disciplines of religious studies and theology. Questions raised by feminist scholars in religion, liberation theologians, theologians of the so-called Third World, and by others traditionally absent from the exegetical enterprise would not remain peripheral or nonexistent for biblical scholarship. Rather, their insights and challenges could become central to the scholarly discourse of the discipline.

In short, if the Society were to engage in a disciplined reflection on the public dimensions and ethical implications of our scholarly work, it would constitute a responsible scholarly citizenship that could be a significant participant in the global discourse seeking justice and well-being for all. The implications of such a repositioning of the task and aim of biblical scholarship would be far-reaching and invigorating.