

Editor's Foreword

The *Journal of Biblical Literature* and the Critical Investigation of the Bible

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Contrary to the usual practice, this issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* begins with an editor's foreword. There is no particular occasion for this unusual step. This issue—134.3—does not mark a particular milestone in the history of the *Journal*, the Society, the field, or the world. And while it happens to be the fifteenth issue to appear under my editorship, there is no particular significance to that minor fact. The foreword is prompted only by my curiosity about the *Journal's* past, and the personalities and issues that have helped to shape it. The pages of the *Journal* itself provide fascinating insights into the history of our discipline, and of the decisions and tensions that have shaped the *Journal* and continue to do so today.

I begin with a confession. Aside from a short book review in the 1990s, I have never published any scholarly work in *JBL*. It was not for lack of trying. In the early stages of my career, I wanted nothing more than an article in the *Journal*, as a validation of my own fledgling identity as a biblical scholar, and as reinforcement for my tenure and promotion dossiers. To that end I twice submitted manuscripts—once in 1986 and once in 1996—that in my view represented my best, most exacting scholarship at the time. Both submissions had historical foci, but both made extensive use of literary-critical methods. Both were rejected. I no longer recall the reviewers' comments in detail; the sting of rejection was softened considerably by the fact that both appeared shortly thereafter in other reputable publications. But from these experiences I formed the impression that a paper that deviated significantly from a narrowly defined historical-critical approach was not likely to be accepted by *JBL*.

I did not try again; in the early 1970s I, like others who were attracted to structuralism, reader-response criticism, and the like, turned to *Semeia* and other

This foreword began as a presentation at the 2014 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego. Many thanks to Bob Buller and Barry Walfish for their comments.

journals that were more welcoming to new approaches. By the early years of the twenty-first century, *JBL* had caught up with the times. When asked to be on the editorial board in 2002, my lack of *JBL* success was not held against me, and I can only assume that all reservations had been overcome when I was asked to be general editor in 2012.

Today, the relevance of literary-critical and other approaches that originated in other disciplines needs no defense. The field, and the *Journal*, have changed, under the influence of developments both within our discipline, such as the growing interest in noncanonical texts from the ancient Mediterranean region, and outside it, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism. The current volume, number 134, includes articles by women and men on the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman contexts, translation theory, redaction criticism, digital humanities, archaeology, poetics and literary criticism, and reception history; gender, sexuality, slavery, imperial-critical studies and ritual studies, pertaining to the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Septuagint, and a broad range of noncanonical material from the ancient Near East to late antiquity. To provide fair peer review, recent general editors have paid close attention to the composition of the editorial board—the group that provides peer review for most of the submissions—to ensure gender balance; international representation; and familiarity with a broad range of approaches, viewpoints, and methods, as well as to provide adequate coverage of the range of biblical and related materials.

A peer-reviewed print journal committed to a high quality of both content and production is not a nimble enterprise; the time lines from submission to decision and from acceptance to publication, while improving, remain lengthy. This situation is frustrating for authors, particularly those in the process of preparing their dossiers for the job market, tenure, or promotion. It also means that new approaches may take longer to reach the pages of the *Journal* than they do the program units of the SBL's annual or international meetings. But it is also important, on occasion, to step back from these preoccupations as well as from the regular tasks of managing the peer review process, editing articles, and choosing the articles for each issue. The pages of the *Journal* itself provide fascinating insights into the history of our discipline, and of the decisions, issues, and tensions that have shaped the *Journal*. JSTOR's archive of back issues is a rich trove on the basis of which to reflect on the role of *JBL* within the Society of Biblical Literature, and in the field of biblical studies in both past and present.

As the SBL's "flagship" journal, *JBL*, like the meetings, book publishing program, and other activities of the Society, is meant to advance the mission of the SBL: to further biblical scholarship. Fundamental to this mission is the Society's identity as "the oldest and largest learned society devoted to the critical investigation of the Bible from a variety of academic disciplines."¹

¹The full text of the mission and strategic vision statements can be found at <http://www.sbl-site.org/aboutus.aspx>.

The role of *JBL*, the question of what constitutes biblical criticism or “critical investigation of the Bible,” and the legitimacy of various approaches have been debated vigorously within the pages of the *Journal* itself since its inception.

The initial goal of the *Journal* was simply to provide a record of the proceedings of the meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, as the SBL was called at its founding in 1880. The following year, the Society voted to refer “the matter of issuing a volume of transactions, and the whole subject of printing the papers in general . . . to the council.”² The first issue, dated December 1881, included the papers read at the June 1881 and December 1881 meetings, as well as the full proceedings of the business meetings. Not only was there no peer review, but there was also no limit on length. The first volume included a sixty-seven-page essay by Ezra Abbott on Romans 9:5;³ some articles in later issues were even longer.

Very soon, however, it became clear that a selection process was essential in order to keep the *Journal* to a reasonable length and, therefore, to a manageable cost. In 1882, it was ruled that the SBL Council would act as an editorial committee and select the papers for publication. The Secretary of Council functioned as general editor; issues were to be produced only when funds were available. The minutes of the December 1882 meeting indicate that the funds were sufficient to print an issue of two hundred pages, and that therefore a selection would be made of papers delivered at the June and December meetings.⁴ At an early point, there was a concern for production quality, including paper and typesetting. From 1913 to 1934, the *Journal* was printed by the Haag-Drugulin Company of Leipzig. The arrangement was questioned after the outbreak of World War I, which disrupted the publication schedule until 1923. Beginning in 1935, the *Journal* was published by the Jewish Publication Society and later with Maurice Jacobs Press. In 1970 it moved in-house to Scholars Press, then to the Society of Biblical Literature, and now, SBL Press.

The *Journal* continued to function as a record of SBL activities until 1960; each issue contained the full proceedings including reports of officers and delegates; for many years the *Journal* also published the membership roster, the list of new members, regional reports, and memorial minutes. (In his account of the history of the SBL, Ernest Saunders laments, “Since 1961 these materials are no longer found in the *Journal* to the relief of the editor but to the dismay of the historian”).⁵ From 1936 to 2007, *JBL* also included book reviews; since 2007 book reviews have been published online in the *Review of Biblical Literature (RBL)*, though not all publishers have taken note of the change—I still occasionally receive copies of new books

²“Proceedings in June, 1881,” *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* 1, no. 2 (December 1881): 206.

³Ezra Abbott, “On the Construction of Romans ix. 5,” *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* 1, no. 2 (December 1881): 87–154, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3268736>.

⁴Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980*, BSNA 8 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 88.

⁵Ibid.

in my office at the University of Ottawa, accompanied by requests that they be reviewed in the *Journal*. Short exegetical notes were once a feature of each issue and are still published on occasion.

Financial matters were, and still are, a matter of central concern. From the outset, the *Journal* was financed at least in part by SBL membership fees. In 1880, membership dues were set at \$3.00, most of which was dedicated to the publication of the *Journal*. Remarkably, dues remained at this level until 1937, when the editor, E. R. Goodenough, challenged the Society either to raise more money or to cut the *Journal*: “If the *Journal* is not now intrinsically worth more than three dollars, the Society should get an Editor who can make it worth more to them.”⁶ In 1939 his lobbying finally bore fruit: dues were raised to \$3.50. Chronic financial problems made life “truly miserable for the editor of JBL.”⁷ With the substantial growth in SBL memberships, and therefore in its organizational structure, the finances are no longer the responsibility of the general editor, a fact for which this editor is grateful.

CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

Practical matters aside, certain themes have persisted from the earliest *JBL* issues to the present day. One concerns the relationship between the Bible and faith, especially Christian faith. In the early years, the *Journal*, as well as the SBL itself, presumed an integral relationship between biblical scholarship and Christian faith. Memorial tributes, for example, took a decidedly Christian tone. In 1882, the Rev. Dr. Harwood opened his tribute in memory of the Rev. E. A. Washburn, D.D., as follows: “It has pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to remove from the membership of this Society our brother, the late Edward A. Washburn, Doctor in Divinity” and concluded it with praise for the Reverend Washburn’s “brave support of every movement for the increase of the knowledge of the faith that is in Christ.”⁸

Not only the tributes but also the articles published in early issues of the *Journal* often included explicitly Christian comments. Professor D. R. Goodwin’s article of 1881, “On the Use of בָּל and Καρδία in the Old and New Testaments,” for example, referred to the words of “our Saviour” rather than, say, the Markan Jesus (referring to Mark 7:15) and concluded his detailed exegesis as follows: “Man believeth to righteousness, and confession is made unto salvation; he believeth with the inner man, and confesseth with the outer man.”⁹

Occasionally the *Journal* published a piece that cannot even be considered scholarship at all, such as the “Paraphrase of the Song of Deborah,” by Professor

⁶Ibid., 33.

⁷Ibid., 49.

⁸“Proceedings in June, 1881,” 208.

⁹D. R. Goodwin, “On the Use of בָּל and Καρδία in the Old and New Testaments,” *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* 1, no. 1 (June 1881): 71–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3268722>.

Thomas Rich. The lengthy poem appeared in the 1881 issue without any analysis or other explanation whatsoever. Here is a taste:

That the strong in Israel laid bare their strength;
That the people came to battle willingly;
Praise ye the Lord!
Hear, O ye kings of earth! ye princes, lend your ear!
I, of the Lord, I fain would sing; would touch the harp,
In honor of the Lord, the God of Israel!¹⁰

The inclusion of Jewish members, which occurred at a very early point in the Society's history,¹¹ encouraged some self-conscious reflection on the use of terminology, even if only to affirm the traditional usage. In his 1933 presidential address, James Moffatt noted that he understood "the objection tabled by some Jewish scholars to the use of the term 'Old Testament' in critical discussions within a society like our own, which embraces both Jewish and Christian members. From their point of view, it does imply a religious affirmation or synthesis to which they cannot agree...." He continued to explain, however, that his use of "Bible" and "biblical" simply followed "the traditional usage of our Society, even although 'Bible' means one thing for a Jew and another for a Christian."¹² From his point of view, the key was "that our common attitude to a Sacred Book involves belief in a collection of ancient literature which was originally intended to represent the sources and the standards of the religion in question; furthermore, that this attitude prompts the desire to apply to its study the ordinary processes of literary and historical criticism."¹³

HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

By the second decade of the twentieth century, biblical scholars were no longer simply assuming the integral role of Christian or Jewish commitment to investigation of the Bible. Indeed, some viewed a sharp dichotomy between scholarship—understood as historical-critical investigation—and faith. An early expression of both the threat and promise of historical criticism can be found in the 1913

¹⁰ Thomas H. Rich, "A Paraphrase of the Song of Deborah," *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* 1, no. 1 (June 1881): 56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3268720>.

¹¹ The first member whom I could identify as Jewish was S. S. Kohn, the rabbi of Mishkan Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Boston. According to the SBL membership rolls published in the *Journal*, he became a member in 1884. In 1894, Mishkan Israel and another Conservative synagogue, Shaarei Tefila, merged to form Congregation Mishkan Tefila, which is still active today.

¹² James Moffatt, "The Sacred Book in Religion," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53, no. 1 (April 1934): 1–2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3259335>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

presidential address by George A. Barton, in which he declared, “Historical investigation has invaded the precincts of our science and has appropriated to itself the land. If it has not revolutionized exegesis, it has revolutionized the interest of our hearers and readers.”¹⁴ Barton then proposed “to briefly review these branches of historical research [archaeology, text criticism, comparative religion, source criticism] and to inquire what rights they have established to be respectfully heard, and under what condition they should influence our judgment in interpreting scripture.”¹⁵

The tone of these comments might imply Barton’s opposition to such new approaches. Barton’s address concluded, however, with a strong vote in favor of historical-critical research.

In view of the vast fields of research at which we have cast hurried glances, it is clear that it is no light task to “interpret historically” today.... Nevertheless it is labor that is worthwhile, for, if we can but discern the historical situation, and set a text in its proper genetic relations, we shall catch its spirit far more surely than in any other way; and, having caught its spirit and the principles which that spirit kindled into life, we can then apply with far greater power the principles and spirit to the problems of our own time. Difficult though the work may be, the Bible cannot take its rightful place in modern life, until this is faithfully and thoroughly done.¹⁶

For Barton, historical criticism, far from being an impediment to faith, was in fact essential to faith and “our” ability to discern the ongoing value of the Bible for modern life. More than this, however, his words suggest that the main value of historical criticism is to make the Bible relevant to modern life. This view, while held by many biblical scholars, was not to persist within the pages of the *Journal*.

That historical-critical scholarship could ruffle the feathers of conservative Christians and Jews was acknowledged by Morris Jastrow Jr., the society’s first Jewish president, in his presidential address of 1916. Jastrow dismissed “the division that people are fond of making nowadays between conservative and radical critics.” In his view, the real distinction is between “the careful and the rash critic.” Jastrow insisted, however, that whether careful or rash, “A scholar tied or pledged to traditional views can never become a critic, even though his learning reaches to the pinnacles of human industry.”¹⁷ For Jastrow, then, true biblical scholarship was unfettered by “traditional views,” presumably religious tenets that pertained to critical issues such as the authorship, dating, or provenance of biblical books.

¹⁴ George A. Barton, “The Hermeneutic Canon ‘Interpret Historically’ in the Light of Modern Research: Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting, Dec. 29, 1913,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 33, no. 1 (March 1914): 56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3259060>.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Ibid., 77.

¹⁷ Morris Jastrow Jr., “Constructive Elements in the Critical Study of the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 36, no. 1/2 (January 1917): 1–2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3259272>.

The issue continued to preoccupy SBL presidents for decades. In his 1936 presidential address, Henry J. Cadbury commented,

The motives of Biblical scholarship are no whit different from the motives of all scholarship, motives sufficient and satisfactory in themselves, the loving, curious search for truth wherever truth should lead. You would resent the idea that you have any special or less scientific aim. Yet I fancy that even today much of the best scholarly work in our fields is combined with a strong religious, not to say apologetic, prepossession. It may not be the prepossession of the past, it may be a prepossession that is itself the result of independent and untrammeled and unorthodox scholarship, but it is a prepossession none the less.¹⁸

In this statement, Cadbury, like many contemporary scholars, argues that it is not truly possible to set aside one's personal commitments in the interests of scholarly objectivity. Morton S. Enslin, whose influence on the direction and reputation of *JBL* can still be felt today, strongly disagreed. Enslin was president of the SBL in 1945 and editor of *JBL* from 1960 to 1969. In his presidential address, Enslin, like Jastrow, spoke out strongly against the inclusion of faith perspectives in biblical scholarship:

It has long been a good homiletic approach to a sermon to outline the background of a biblical narrative or to expound a custom or slant on life which existed—or at least the preacher thought it did—in biblical days. Then he was ready for the really important part of his program: its application to present-day life. That occasionally pretty weird bits of information were forthcoming in these presentations ... is not likely to be denied. But when essentially the same procedure is practiced by the biblical scholar; when he becomes more concerned in the practical availability and moralistic application of his findings than he is in discovering facts, it is time to sound the tocsin.¹⁹

This amusing comment prefaced a serious critique of the quality of papers delivered at SBL meetings and published in the *Journal*.

Again and again in these sessions papers have been read (and later printed) in which the tone was distinctly critical of the critical and dispassionate approach to biblical problems. Repeatedly we have been told that we owe it to our students to aid them to a warm religious attitude to life, to a deeper and more satisfying faith; that we lay too great emphasis on the critical and analytical—I have heard it styled, the minutiae—that we need a new and more positive technique; that we should realize that scholarly reserve and dispassionate appraisal are out of place in our field. We are dealing with “words of life,” with materials of divine revelation, with materials vastly different from those in other disciplines. Above

¹⁸ Henry J. Cadbury, “Motives of Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56, no. 1 (March 1937): 7–8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3259625>.

¹⁹ Morton S. Enslin, “The Future of Biblical Studies,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65, no. 1 (March 1946): 6–7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3262213>.

all we are ministers before we are scholars. To me this emphasis is utterly false and vicious.²⁰

Enslin's comments, and the sharp dichotomy between faith and scholarship that underlies them, did not go unchallenged. In his presidential address of 1949, Floyd V. Filson reiterated Cadbury's conviction that it is not possible to separate one's own convictions from one's scholarship.

The scholar thus deceives himself, and so hurts his work, if he thinks that he is not personally involved in life even in his study, and if he thinks that he can understand the course of events without assuming at least unconsciously some interpretation of the meaning of life and events. History in any full and true sense includes and expresses a deep-reaching interpretation of the meaning of life. Therefore it is a false antithesis to contrast the partisanship of the Biblical mind with the objectivity of the scientific mind.... Strong historical writing expresses a world view. To write history is to interpret.²¹

Like many a postmodern philosopher, Filson insisted that true neutrality was neither possible nor desirable; every scholarly endeavor involves interpretation, through lenses that are often, perhaps always, tinged by the perspectives of the scholars themselves. Whereas we now understand such perspectives to be multiple and complex, Filson had in mind Jewish and Christian believers specifically:

For the believer, whether a member of the Church or of the Synagogue, it is not possible to study and write history from a neutral stand-point. He is a committed individual. His God is the God of his mind and heart and will. His total activity is an expression of faith and obedience to God, whose claim on him is never partial or intermittent. His study as well as his prayer is an expression of his religious relation to God.²²

Today we may debate whether neutrality is in fact the stance required for critical investigation of the Bible, and whether believing Jews and Christians, among others, are unable to engage with the Bible except "as an expression of religious relation to God."

Filson, in turn, was strongly criticized by his successor, Robert Pfeiffer, who in his 1950 address argued:

Although common sense requires a distinction in the Bible between actual events in human history and faith in a God controlling the course of history,... the method, which combines critical research and religious faith, seems to be increasing in popularity among American biblical scholars: it has received the accolade of Professor Floyd V. Filson in his Presidential Address before the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in 1949, and has been defended by several of its members. This trend backwards to Deuteronomistic historiography seems

²⁰Ibid., 7.

²¹Floyd V. Filson, "Method in Studying Biblical History," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 1950): 14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3261406>.

²²Ibid., 14–15.

to me fatal to objective research, and goes hand in hand with the alarming decadence of serious philological studies in the field of Semitic and Indo-European languages on the part of young American biblical students, particularly Christian.²³

And so the controversy continued, and, indeed, in some corners of our field, it still continues. Enslin's comments reflect—and, in doing so, reinforce—an opposition between faith and scholarship that some seventy years later seems too stark and simplistic. *JBL*'s editorial position has been clear, however, for many years: although many of our authors have religious convictions and affiliations, the *Journal* does not publish papers that are explicitly confessional in nature or purpose.²⁴

The dedication of the *Journal* primarily to historical-critical studies was cemented during the editorship of Morton Enslin from 1960 to 1969; during this decade Enslin was able to shape the *Journal* in the direction dictated by his own scholarly convictions. Yet by the early 1970s, biblical scholars had begun to explore methods that were developed in other fields, including literary criticism and theory. To accommodate these new methods, in 1972 the Society created a new journal, *Semeia*, a self-described “experimental journal devoted to the exploration of new and emergent areas and methods of biblical criticism.” These methods included linguistics, folklore studies, literary theory, structuralism, social anthropology, and many others. *Semeia* addressed issues not often raised in *JBL* or other journals at the time, such as ethics, postcolonialism, war, women, and slavery, and adopted a themed approach whereby each issue was constructed and edited by a member of the editorial board.²⁵

The two publications were complementary. As Fernando Segovia has noted,

While the *Journal* would preserve its tried-and-true historical orientation, *Semeia* would turn to the newfangled question of language. The *Journal* would remain the vehicle for the grand model of interpretation present in biblical studies since its inception, historical criticism, with its view of historiography as empiricist, objectivist, and representationally direct. *Semeia* would function as the venue for a new grand model of interpretation beginning to affect biblical studies, literary criticism.²⁶

²³ Robert H. Pfeiffer, “Facts and Faith in Biblical History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 70, no. 1 (March 1951): 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3262039>.

²⁴ Authors of these sorts of submissions are encouraged to submit their articles to one of the many fine confessional publications that have a mandate to publish such contributions. This may seem like a limitation on the spirit of openness that I, with the support of the SBL leadership, am trying to encourage, but it is required, I believe, by the diversity of our readership and our contributors, and by the emphasis on critical biblical scholarship, which proceeds by posing hypotheses and engaging in argumentation.

²⁵ http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/books_semeiaj.aspx. After 2002, the journal *Semeia* was replaced by the book series *Semeia Studies*.

²⁶ Many thanks to Fernando Segovia for permission to use a portion of his remarks on the occasion of *Semeia*'s fortieth anniversary at the SBL annual meeting in San Diego in 2014.

Semeia served an important purpose for those, like myself, who were keen to experiment with the new approaches being developed in other disciplines and did not find *JBL* to be amenable to such work. Even had *JBL* been more open to new methodologies, there may well have been a need for a journal like *Semeia* that was organized topically and could respond more quickly than a standard journal to a changing scholarly landscape.

But even as *JBL*, under Enslin and his immediate successors, was perceived as charting a strictly historical-critical course, the *Journal* itself did publish articles, including presidential addresses, that ventured into new territory. In his 1968 presidential address, for example, James Muilenburg laid the groundwork for the approach that he referred to as “rhetorical criticism,” as a supplement to form criticism:

For after all has been said and done about the forms and types of biblical speech, there still remains the task of discerning the actuality of the particular text, and it is with this, we aver, that we must reckon, as best we can, for it is this concreteness which marks the material with which we are dealing. In a word, then, we affirm the necessity of form criticism, but we also lay claim to the legitimacy of what we have called rhetorical criticism.²⁷

In an often-reprinted 1972 article entitled “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” Wayne A. Meeks used the principles of social-scientific research to explore the relationship between the Gospel of John and its original audience. This article provided a foundation for much of subsequent Johannine scholarship, which has accepted Meeks’s fundamental argument that the Gospel of John is an etiology of the Johannine group or community: “In telling the story of the Son of Man who came down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God.”²⁸

JBL AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE SCRIPTORIUM

A second question that has persisted over many decades concerns whether, or to what degree, biblical studies should engage explicitly with contemporary society. Does such engagement compromise the task of “critical investigation of the Bible”?

²⁷James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 1 (March 1969): 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3262829>.

²⁸Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (March 1972): 69–70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3262920>.

A number of SBL presidents argued that the isolation of biblical studies within the Ivory Tower constituted an abdication of social responsibility. In the aftermath of World War I, James Montgomery, president in 1918, deplored the fact that,

As professionals we have been able to contribute nothing to the salvation of the world, and some of us have chafed at the reins, that while almost every other profession has been called on to do its part in the wonderful organization of differentiated functions whereby the war has been won, we, along with similar groups of academics, have been exempted, exempt because we had nothing to give.²⁹

Montgomery charged the guild with evasion of responsibility in its failure to interpret the Bible to the public and called for a new program of scholarship in America, which would develop its own resources and techniques rather than follow German models. Montgomery noted that “Germany has been our mistress in Biblical scholarship, we have gone to school to her, her textbooks have been ours. Now the moral ties binding us with her have been broken, and with that has snapped the intellectual relationship. If it were otherwise, we were pedants, not men, no better than mummies.”³⁰ In the background of these comments is the repudiation of German culture and the German people that developed in the United States during the war years.

The impact of world events on the field was addressed during World War II by the 1941 SBL president, Julian Morgenstern, who predicted that World War II would require a shift of the discipline’s center of gravity from Germany to North America:

Germany was, of course, the cradle of biblical science.... 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,... we know that in Germany biblical science is doomed.... Our friends and fellow-workers, not only in Germany but also in the occupied countries, will be, of this we may be sadly certain,... the last generation of Bible scholars. 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.³¹

²⁹James A. Montgomery, “Present Tasks of American Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 38, no. 1/2 (January 1919): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3260006>.

³⁰Ibid., 7. It must be remembered that, at this time, *JBL* itself was still being published in Germany.

³¹Julian Morgenstern, “The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 61, no. 1 (March 1942): 4–5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3262262>.

Though Jewish, Morgenstern did not yet seem aware of the decimation of European Jewry, including its biblical scholars. We now know, of course, that his pessimism regarding the demise of German and European biblical scholarship was unfounded; his prediction about the growth of North America as a center for biblical studies, however, was realized.

Then there were some who did not believe that biblical exegesis could have an impact on the world at all. E. R. Goodenough, the 1951 SBL president, doubted that

the course of civilization will be appreciably changed by the production of the absolutely ideal New Testament text, or indeed would be deeply affected by the discovery of the complete set of New Testament autographs. I should imagine that if we had Paul's letter to the Romans in its original form the problem of what he meant to say in it would be just about what it is now when we read it in Nestle's text. And the question of the relevance for modern man of whatever Paul may have said would certainly be exactly what it is.³²

Goodenough's pessimism also seemed to tinge his evaluation of the discipline. In his 1951 presidential address, Goodenough recalled a contentious statement in his final report as *JBL* editor in 1942. "I said at that time that one of the difficulties in editing the *Journal* was that not only in America, but the world over, research in the field of the New Testament had sunk to a nadir, so much so that even the conducting in the *Journal* of a regular section for reviews of works on the New Testament forced one often to discuss books which were really not worth much notice."³³

In Goodenough's view, the field evinced a lack of vitality, due at least in part to the fact that, in his words,

Few young men in these days want to become students in the biblical field..., for somehow there are few young men who feel that biblical scholarship has much that is creative to give them.... The young men are right: we have at the moment as a group no such vital and creative wares to offer as men in other fields. The pressure of contemporary problems is too great for it to matter much whether Q was in one piece, or was a series of disconnected leaves ... or whether there ever was a Q at all or not.³⁴

More than a half century later, I have a more optimistic view of the vitality of our field, due not only to the renewed interest of "young men" but of women and men, young and not so young, from across the globe, who ponder the Bible from a broad range of perspectives, including its philological mysteries as well as its relevance to contemporary societies in local, regional, national, and international contexts. In this regard, the field has heeded the general tenor of the Society's 1987

³² Erwin R. Goodenough, "The Inspiration of New Testament Research," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71, no. 1 (March 1952): 1–2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3261842>.

³³ Ibid., 1.

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

president, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who articulated a rhetorical-ethical paradigm that insisted on the “public-political responsibility of biblical scholarship.”

[The paradigm] seeks to engender a self-understanding of biblical scholarship as communicative praxis.... 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.³⁵

Schüssler Fiorenza here calls for the engagement of biblical studies with the world and provides a paradigm for doing so. Today there are many for whom this paradigm has become a powerful force in their own biblical scholarship. Among them is Fernando F. Segovia, who, in his 2014 presidential address, called for a fusion of the critical and the political, the biblical and the worldly, drawing on critical theories from the Global North and Global South alike.³⁶

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This brief survey has highlighted the different ways that the SBL’s self-definition as a society devoted to the “critical investigation of the Bible” was interpreted over the course of the *Journal*’s long history. Perhaps the most striking finding of my archival research concerned Morton Enslin’s strong stamp on the *Journal*, which continued far beyond the nine years of his tenure as general editor. For Enslin, critical scholarship was by definition historical-critical; historical-critical methodology, in turn, consisted of source, form, and redaction criticism, on the one hand, and investigation of the ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Greco-Roman “background” to the Bible, on the other.

It is fortunate, however, that the Society of Biblical Literature has chosen not to define the term “critical investigation.” The absence of a precise definition permits the growth and development of the field. Nowadays, for example, few, I believe, would define historical criticism quite so narrowly as scholars did in the mid-twentieth century. Now we talk about ancient historical and literary contexts and make explicit use of methods from literary studies, social science, philosophy and critical theory, gender studies, and other fields. Nevertheless, the interests of most articles published in *JBL* remain historical.

³⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (March 1988): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3267820>.

³⁶ Fernando F. Segovia, “Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (March 2015): 6–29.

I freely admit that my own interests are also primarily historical, though my concern is less for the origins of the biblical corpus than for how it may have been heard or read by ancient readers. I am also very interested in reception, primarily the ongoing use of the Bible in contemporary cultural media such as film, television, music, and fiction. This too is ultimately a historical concern, because the popular reception of the Bible strongly reflects the role of the Bible in a particular local history and culture. So, for example, the role of the Bible in Hollywood films reflects Puritan understandings of America as the promised land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁷

At the same time, I recognize that the *Journal* must also have room for other types of concerns, such as those voiced by Schüssler Fiorenza and Segovia in their respective presidential addresses. Such work rarely appears in the *Journal*, perhaps because of an ongoing perception that *JBL* does not welcome submissions whose main interests are other than historical. I hope that over time this perception will change, allowing the *Journal* to be more representative of the exciting diversity of approaches and concerns that characterize the papers given at the annual and international meetings. Future contributions to *JBL*'s occasional Forum series will, I hope, spur this effort along.

It is true, as I have noted, that the general editor of *JBL* can have an impact on the shape of the *Journal*. I am hoping to do so as well, in my modest way, by seeking to broaden the range of critical approaches and perspectives at the same time as continuing to welcome more “traditional” research. It is a privilege to be the general editor, not only because of the opportunity to contribute to the field in a substantial way, but also because of the opportunity to work with the many wonderful people without whom there could be no journal: the hard-working editorial board members, who often find their own research interrupted by requests to review submissions; the authors, whose interest in publishing their “critical investigations of the Bible” provides the *Journal* with its *raison d'être*; the leadership of the SBL, including John Kutsko, Bob Buller, and the SBL Council, whose strong support I appreciate daily; and, especially, the team: managing editor Billie Jean Collins, editorial assistant Georgette Ledgister, and our dedicated copy-editor and typesetter, Maurya P. Horgan of The HK Scriptorium, Inc. It is a pleasure working with them all.

I invite you, Gentle Reader, to dip into the present issue of the *Journal*. I hope that you will find, as I do, much to interest you.

³⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Biblical Basis of the American Myth,” in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles B. Gunn, BACul 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 219–29. See Adele Reinhartz, “Holy Words in Hollywood: DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and American Identity,” in *The Bible in the Public Square: Its Enduring Influence in American Life*, ed. Carol Meyers, Eric M. Meyers, and Mark A. Chancey, BSNA 27 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 123–35.