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The Future of Biblical Studies

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# THE FUTURE OF BIBLICAL STUDIES\*

MORTON S. ENSLIN

CROZER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

LIKE many of my recent predecessors in this office I am in a strait betwixt two. Shall I discuss some phase of a technical biblical problem in which I am greatly interested and for which I may perhaps have some competence? I confess that the temptation is great, for the presidential address provides a threefold advantage over the ordinary paper presented at our sessions: one can speak as long as his conscience allows, the number of listeners is usually larger, and there is no opportunity for debate and rebuttal. What an ideal situation to develop such a thesis as: (a) The proclamation which now stands in the gospel pages as the word of John the Baptist, *viz.*, the advent of his greater successor, is really the word of Jesus the prophet, heralding the approach of his greater successor, the supernatural son of man, destined speedily to appear to set up the final judgment; or (b) The writings traditionally ascribed to Luke are clearly dependent not only upon the Gospel of Mark but upon the Gospel of Matthew; and thus one of the greatest services to gospel analysis would be the immediate interment of the will-o'-the-wisp Q, during which commitment service a few brief words might be said as to the utter unreliability of one who through the centuries has been a heavy liability to historical research, the loquacious and irresponsible Papias of Hierapolis.

I repeat, the temptation so to use this hour is great, even though it would probably prompt some modern "most excellent Festi" to scandalized retort (at some more convenient season).

\*The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 27, 1945, at the General Theological Seminary in New York City.

Though confident that either thesis could be set forth in words of truth and soberness, I forbear, for I am convinced that at this time there are other matters which should be frankly faced. I turn to this other subject with some trepidation, for I fear that I shall seem to be assuming an unpleasantly critical, perhaps even scolding, rôle, in which I seek to weigh my colleagues in the balances and find them wanting. That is not my purpose. For nearly twenty-five years I have been devoted to this SOCIETY and to the tasks to which it is committed. I hope that I can assume that my colleagues will believe that though my judgment may be sadly in error, my devotion to our common task is genuine.

I have announced as the title of this address: "The Future of Biblical Studies." It might better have been stated as a question: "Is There a Future for Biblical Studies?" Frankly, to me this is far from being a rhetorical question conveniently so phrased in order the more effectively to answer confidently, "Of course there is." To me this is a very real question, and I confess that I do not know the answer. I see perils all along the line, and I am increasingly pessimistic as to the outcome.

To many this confession of pessimistic concern will probably seem particularly strange. Frequently it has been stressed in recent months that this is a time of great promise; that due to the convulsions through which we have been passing the road is clear for great advance on this side of the Atlantic. Biblical scholarship has collapsed, we are being told, in Europe. It will be decades, if ever, before German scholarship, which for long blazed the trails, will again be in the picture; and England too will find the hands of her clock so turned back that it will be many years before she will again play the part she long essayed. For the Americas — the United States and Canada — although we must feel saddened at these misfortunes which our colleagues across the seas have suffered, it is a time of promise, the sound of marching is clearly to be discerned in the branches of the balsam trees. We must be up and doing: upon our shoulders rests the problem of carrying on. It is a time of challenge, but it is a time of promise.

There is truth in all this; of course there is. German scholar-

ship — and I am heartsick to say it, for there has been none more appreciative and devoted to it than I — has suffered a dreadful setback. Many are reviving the old charge which years ago was so popular: it is God's judgment upon the vicious higher criticism and religious infidelity. The temple has finally been destroyed. A.D. 1945 is but another anniversary of A.D. 70. Burned temples and battered cities, be they at the hands of Roman legions or due to the bombs of the holy Allies, are an unanswerable proof of the verdict of heaven and its celestial population. Once more the pure gospel is being preserved. I need not say that that sort of pious smugness appears to me both absurd and disgusting. I mention it simply to exclude it from the sphere of intelligent thought. It would be hard to believe that any member of this SOCIETY, which owes its existence to that at which the ignorant and the fanatics delight to tilt, would see this as the cause, direct or indirect, of the terrible collapse across the seas.

Nor is it, as I see it, the destruction of universities and libraries. A scholar cannot be bankrupt by the loss of his chair, his books, or — God save the mark — his notes. Their loss may cause him pain and temporary inconvenience. It is never fatal. The catastrophe is far more terrible. It is because so many have sold out to the demands of the hour, to the necessity of having their findings congenial to the outlook of those in political supremacy. That sort of prostitution ends scholarship. Undoubtedly many have refused so to sell out, have kept their torches aglow, even if temporarily under pitchers; but for these older men there can be but little future. By the time that they can get back to work, the scythe of Father Time will have reaped too many. It is the crop of new students, those who must in every age carry on when we older ones step aside, that marks the certain doom. The vicious indoctrination, the training which they have received, can scarcely fail to make it utterly impossible for the majority, in our portion of the field of scholarship at least, to learn to approach their task in the only way that can spell advance.

Nor is this the only indication, as I see it, of the decline across the Atlantic. There is another element, and it involves England

as well — it is with reluctance that I mention it — the provincial ignorance of and contempt for the work of scholars in other lands, notably America. As a boy, I remember the oft-repeated remark of a relative of mine, an intimate friend of Sir Oliver Lodge. Said my relative, "Sir Oliver has often said that the only American he would really care to know and talk with is Henry Cabot Lodge." Sir Oliver was a distinguished mathematician and physicist; yet he was apparently utterly contemptuous or indifferent to the work of men eminent in his field in the land to the west. Whether the principal of Birmingham College was quoted correctly or not, of course I do not know; but from my own reading I am inclined to believe that this attitude has still persisted. In the writings of English biblical scholars, as I have come to know them — and my reading has been intensive, for in addition to the necessity of keeping myself reasonably at home in my own field, I have read many manuscripts and books from England, submitted to America for possible so-called "American editions"—I am continually amazed and pained at the almost entire neglect of American work, unless the American authors had chanced to have emigrated from the more privileged soil of England. America is a good land to come to, in which to pick up generous honoraria for casual and condescending lectures, occasionally even to settle in, and in recent years to send refugees to; but apparently that is all. I do not think that I am exaggerating. There is nothing anti-British in me. Only recently I had lunch with an Oxford professor, now a major in the British army. We chanced to mention this subject, and he entirely (and apparently regretfully) agreed. He felt that it was definitely true and that it was fatal. He inclined to explain it as the carry-over from the days when English scholarship was so regarded by Germans. And I was interested to hear him refer to a German professor who had uttered almost precisely the same word which I had heard from Sir Oliver: "I should like to see Professor So and So; there is no one else in England worth seeing."

To the extent that this is a true diagnosis it is a clear-cut indication that America has one great advantage. We have not been indifferent to German and British scholarship. However this may be explained — as due to sheer necessity, to docile

imitation, as an affectation of wide learning, or on more commendable grounds — the fact stands. And to that extent we have a tremendously valuable tool if we are to bear the brunt in the next decade or two of scholarly advance, for this snobbish and absurd blindness to the labors of others is fatal to true scholarship.

The pessimism which I feel is distinctly not due to any feeling that we will be forced to compete with more competent antagonists. To me such a feeling is doubly false. First, because, as I have suggested, I see little prospect of what might be styled "more competent competitors" abroad. But far more important than that, there can be no such thing as "competition" in a field such as ours. To think in such terms is basically vicious. It is only as we join hands with all other competent laborers, and with no thought of personal rewards essay the common task, that progress can be made. Nor does it appear to me that the work is over, that the mine has been emptied of its ore. On the contrary, to change the figure and to make it more appropriate to this audience, never has the field been whiter to the harvest. So much to do, so many problems to be grappled with. Much has been done, but in comparison with what has yet to be done we have scarcely started. No, there is no problem of lack of work, no need to slow down production, no need to demand a closed shop to keep out other workers whose skill might embarrass; in short, no necessity for our SOCIETY to apply for membership in the C.I.O. But there is no less a grave danger, and it may be phrased in terms of the same metaphor which I have been using: a lack of skilled workmen and the even more desperate indication that the lack will grow more and more evident. To put it brutally: as I have suggested, there is a deal of talk that biblical scholarship has collapsed in Europe, that it is up to America to carry on. To this I agree, but my alarm lies in the fact that I am far from sure that we can do it.

"It can happen here" is no longer — if it ever was — a ridiculous and unwarranted bid for cheap notoriety. It *is* happening here. Precisely the same virus which has poisoned German scholarship in the last few years is in our blood, though perhaps in a somewhat different form: the incentive to make our findings

practical and acceptable to the self-constituted leaders. It is easy to damn the perversion of German scholarship to the so-called Nazi ideology and point of view. I see a similar peril here, and it is even more forbidding and ominous because it appears so innocent and virtuous. It is the demand that our researches strengthen faith and provide blueprints for modern conduct.

I am not thinking for the moment of the set-back to scholarship which has resulted from the onslaughts of the whorish slut Bellona; the ruthless sidetracking and derailing of everything that does not materially advance the war effort. Every civilized man deplors that and hopes that it is only a temporary nightmare which may eventually pass; that once again there may result a bit more equitable adjustment; and that campuses may once more do something else than turn out cannons and cannon fodder. (Parenthetically remarked, I am far from being a pacifist, was in the past war, and would gladly have been in this one had I been free to follow my own inclination. I am no radical, but a very conservative American, dreadfully proud of my country and flag.) There is a real peril, of course, that we shall not swing back after the apparent need is over. Habits do tend to remain seated — especially bad habits. Precisely the same evil that became an actuality in the German way of life exists as a potentiality here. But I am not thinking of that at the moment. The danger which I see is more deep-rooted and was in evidence long before this cosmic delirium under which we are now suffering set in.

The peril of the demand for the practical in biblical research is of long standing. At first it was so obvious as to constitute no especial danger. 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 — not to mention the essentially similar, if even less guarded, attempts of the Sunday-school teacher — is not likely to be denied. This

is not the time or place to criticize or even to discuss them. 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. And this situation seems to me to have been reached today and to be tincturing our whole discipline. 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 all we are ministers before we are scholars.

To me this emphasis is utterly false and vicious. That many theological and biblical students might profitably be encouraged to be better men with more vital religious inclinations and less cant, I do not question. I have taught them too many years to labor under any illusions in that respect. As a historian of the New Testament, however, I do not consider it a whit more my task to temper the wind to shorn and mangy lambs or to distort my findings for fear of undermining stubborn credulity masquerading as simple babelike faith than it is the task of my colleagues in the chairs of mathematics or comparative anatomy in the near-by university.

By indirection, yes; by encouraging them by precept and example — with the emphasis a hundred times stronger on the latter — to be dissatisfied with anything save the most honest and unbiased work they are capable of, to refuse to take the short cuts, to assume the answers, to discover what they want to discover, to prefer the neat and brisk encyclopædia articles to the labor of discovering the facts themselves; above all, to rid their minds utterly of the notion that the literature which



they are examining is of a different sort from that under scrutiny by their brothers, the classical students and Assyriologists; in short, to encourage them to let their findings determine their feelings, not their feelings their findings; to keep their hands off the scales when weighing evidence, even if it concerns the validity of the faith of their fathers (or pastors); to make them realize that it is the one unforgivable sin against the deities of learning to make the one pan of the balance go down because they want it to go down, even if they are convinced that their own soul's salvation is hanging in the balance.

Many of us labor under the distinct liability of being members of faculties of theological seminaries. Most of our students are destined for the parish ministry. Ideally that should be no handicap; practically, in many cases it is. Tremendous pressure is exerted, directly and indirectly, to serve out the pabulum which the professors of religious education, of parish duties, of pastoral psychiatry — and, above all, the students themselves — feel essential in the training of a jovial and not too conspicuously educated pastor. Or to put it briefly, what is being demanded today is that we provide a warm religious approach. (Again let me interject a personal remark. I am all in favor of genuine religion. To me it is one of the great essentials of life, but I do wholeheartedly detest the synthetic and add-hot-water-and-serve variety. Furthermore let me add, I teach in a seminary where I am blessed with complete academic freedom. I record this fact with gratitude.) It is common knowledge that in recent years in several of our prominent theological schools, when it became necessary to make new faculty appointments, the deciding factor was that the newcomer should be such as to cause the administration no problems in that respect. In that connection I remember the word of an old theological principal — conservative in many ways, but a genuine scholar. Said he, in answer to the query as to how he selected his faculty: "I get the most radical man I can find."

But today we are hearing windy gusts from tired pseudo-liberals about the necessity of going beyond liberalism, of the need of a new orthodoxy. Apparently they have emerged from

the foliage of the tree which they thought they had been climbing, only to discover that they have been climbing out the branch instead of up the trunk. Now at the end of the branch — and a very unsteady branch it is — exposed to the rocks of the small boys on the ground beneath (but not too far beneath!) these poor tired liberals are making a great to-do with their warm religious accents, their frequent retreats, their slightly self-conscious confessions that climbing is not all that it is cracked up to be. This, it might be remarked, is simply one more case where climbing has been confused with crawling. Insofar as this sort of blight is allowed to creep into biblical scholarship — and the evidence is that it is creeping in at an alarming rate — we are destroying our future through showing ourselves unworthy of having one.

Practical values, like Maeterlinck's bluebird, if my experience is worth anything, are never discovered as the result of conscious search. They come as the by-products of honest search. As we quarry where the rock is hard, with no other purpose than to trace the illusive lode, again and again we make discoveries, find values which we never dreamed existed. But we should not have found them had we gone after them. That to me is one of the great rewards of scholarship: it teaches a man that if he is honest in his quest his dividends will be large.

But they are not dividends honored on life's Wall Streets, nor are they choired by ecclesiastical angels. The scholar must expect to be lonely. Doubts and uncertainties, receding rainbows, vanishing horizons, eternal questions which flicker before his tired eyes — these are his priceless reward. Not for him peace and certainty and the so nice absolutes; never can he be sure that he can find a solution; rarely can he be sure that there even is a solution. All he can do is toil on patiently, honestly, contemptuous of the short cuts, the easy guesses, the heart-warming certainties.

It is the growing disinclination to these rigors, to this loneliness and contempt for the neat, practical results, that make me so frankly skeptical and pessimistic of the future of American biblical scholarship.

Another source of concern is our growing ignorance of history. I do not mean primarily the history of the particular period with which we are engaged, but the history of research and criticism. To what extent are Reimarus, Herder, Strauss, Wilke, F. C. Baur, Bruno Bauer, Wrede more than names on which to hang a few label-like sentences of patronizing dismissal? This is tragic in the extreme. The most practical thing that members of this society — at least those in the New Testament section; and my guess is that my Old Testament colleagues would find it not unrewarding — could do would be to spend a year in simply reading and pondering these men. The brilliant insights they achieved, most of which have been lost sight of — in part, because of what were regarded the “extremes” they reached; in part, because some of their tools were faulty — would be of inestimable value today in the hands of men competent to use them. What folly it is that with a task so immense as ours we fail to use our resources. Each time I reread these men — and I do it not infrequently — I am reminded of that monolith lying to the south of Baalbek. Apparently it was too big for the original mechanics to use; and so not only did they not finish it, but it has lain there useless, save as a possible aid to superstitious women, ever since. So with the insights of Reimarus, of Strauss, of Bruno Bauer. We dismiss them easily, when we could learn and profit from them so much.

And one final word. What about our students? Are we training men to be ready for these tasks awaiting American scholarship of which we so glibly speak? Frankly, I doubt it. The majority of my students are unable even to make effective use of Hebrew and Greek, know little German and less Latin. It is easy to treat this with complaisance. Since intelligent men no longer believe that the divine revelation was made in these biblical tongues or can be interpreted solely in them, it may seem less important that they are being fast pushed, not from the centre of the student's stage — that happened long ago — but over the footlights. I am not so complaisant. I have no desire to have to teach compulsory Greek to most of the crop of my students — and I fancy that mine would compare very favorably

with those in most schools. I shiver at the type of student we seem to be attracting. Granted that many of them will make faithful and not ineffective pastors; but where are the men to come from to do the work which is singularly elusive to the man whose professional equipment does not extend beyond a round full voice, the ability to provide an hour's retreat from reality once a week, and a perspiring readiness to apply his monkey wrench to all the sexual maladjustments in his larger parish? In a word, are we training scholars to take our places and continue our work with greater effectiveness when, to quote the ancient word, we lie prone in the dust? The way that question is answered, the question I propounded at the start of this address must be answered.

And I cannot help feeling that we in the biblical chairs in the universities and seminaries are in no small part to blame. We are not attracting the type of student we must have. Young men are as honest and ready to devote themselves today to the laborious and the painful as they ever were. But our field has received an evil name when it comes to the matter of standards and scholarly ideals. Too generally we are regarded as defenders, not as eager, restless seekers. I flinch everytime I remember the word of an eminent dean of law to his entering class: "Gentlemen, please realize that you have to work here; this is not a theological seminary." And only recently I was speaking to a colleague in the university where I also teach about one of our better-grade theological students who was taking work with him. In answer to my query as to his progress, my colleague's word was prompt: "He is doing very good work — for a theological student." Gentlemen, that was an ominous word.

I do not know the answers. I still am hoping that things are not so bad as to me they appear. I am hoping that in the coming days we shall see a new temper in biblical research, a greater integrity and dispassionate industry, the recognition that truth does not need to be apologized for or compromised even if we are desirous of gaining funds for a new expedition or a scholarly investigation, a keener cutting edge to our critical tools, a refusal

to tone down and distort facts to make them less disquieting, an ability to attract students of the highest ability and most thorough training because they sense that they will not be hamstrung or fettered but that in this field, as in every other worthy of its name, they will have the opportunity to pursue truth unhampered, unafraid — and under the direction of men whom they can trust and revere.