

Digging Down and Reaching Out: A Story of Biblical Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century¹

ROBERT H. VON THADEN, JR.

Mercyhurst University

“In the posteverything world it turns out humans can't kick the story habit. Homer gets the last laugh.” —Glen Duncan²

It was 1787, the story goes, when Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) delivered an address that signaled an important step in understanding biblical studies as an academic discipline as distinct from systematic theology in service of a church community. In his “Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology, and the Right Determination of the Aims of Each” Gabler, the story simplistically tells us, lays out the differences between studying what the biblical texts meant (in their historical context) and what they mean (to contemporary practitioners of biblical religion). Like most stories of beginnings, this paradigmatic moment was one of many as biblical studies developed, especially during the important eighteenth century, into a field of humanistic inquiry rather than *the* decisive spark. It is similar in kind to fixing the start of the Reformation on October 31, 1517 when Luther nailed his theses to the door of the university church in Wittenberg. The moment stands within a stream of intellectual work and upheaval—its import is retroactively assigned to serve as a symbolic marker that prompts the retrieval of a vast and complicated history of biblical interpretation both before and after Gabler.³

The history of modern biblical interpretation can heuristically be viewed through the lens of this simplified Gablerian dichotomy. Scholars struggle both to contextualize ancient texts in their social and historical contexts as well as wrestle with how contemporary readers (religious or not) make sense of the meaning potential latent in these same texts.⁴ Knowing (and remembering) the history of our guild, I argue, is necessary for biblical scholars as we move the storyline of our discipline forward into the twenty-first century—if only to be reminded of the wisdom of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes (1:9): “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” Being mindful of this saying can help us avoid the pitfalls of the past, while maintaining an appropriate level of humility as we endeavor to make sense of biblical worlds.⁵ The resources for studying this history of interpretation are legion. John H. Hayes’s two-volume *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* that appeared in 1999 is an indispensable reference tool for this kind of intellectual remembering.⁶ Noteworthy for analyzing scholarship in the half-century following the Second World War are the volumes in the Society of Biblical Literature’s “The Bible and Its Modern Interpreters” series.⁷ And for those of us who are

New Testament scholars, William Baird's magisterial three-volume *History of New Testament Research*⁸ provides both a sweeping and in depth study of important scholars and trends "from the period of the enlightenment through the first two-thirds of the twentieth century."⁹ What all of this scholarship highlights is the importance of locating biblical scholars and their work in their own historical and intellectual contexts in order to make sense of the stories of their contribution.

The legacy of scholars from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries is primarily a historical one. They tried to set biblical literature into its own context and take these writings on their own terms. The fruits of their labor can be broadly identified as the historical-critical method. As Michael Coogan aptly describes it:

With its many sub-disciplines, the historical-critical method dominated biblical interpretation through the mid-twentieth century, and it continues to be influential. The scholars [who developed aspects of this method] were immensely learned, often experts in a variety of fields, including philology, textual criticism, comparative literature, and the study of ancient cultures contemporaneous with the biblical traditions. Moreover, also in keeping with the intellectual mood of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were optimistic, in retrospect even overconfident, operating on the assured conviction that with sufficient data and careful analysis of the data an objective, accurate, and complete understanding of the Bible was possible.¹⁰

Since the mid-twentieth century, however, and especially since the last quarter of that century, many began to view the (by then) traditional historical modes of engaging biblical texts as far too limited. As those scholars who developed the edifice of the historical-critical model were "experts in a variety of fields," so too do contemporary scholars study, master, and use tools from a variety of academic specializations to ask new questions of biblical texts. As Carol Newsom notes, "in keeping with a trend characteristic of most humanities and social sciences, there has been a strong movement to interdisciplinary conversation."¹¹ The story of biblical studies in the twenty-first century is moving to include many more voices.

Biblical scholars laboring in the academy in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, then, are heirs to a rich and varied intellectual tradition. The current field is marked both by increased specialization as well as an increased desire (and need) to reach across boundaries for cross disciplinary conversations.¹² Viewed one way, twenty-first century biblical scholarship looks fragmented and chaotic—a story without a coherent plot.¹³ Viewed another way, it is a vibrant champion of both humanistic inquiry and the promises of digital tools for making sense of vast quantities of data. While the specific iterations of this fragmentation and connection are

located in the specificities of the twenty-first century academy, if we take the long view of the history of *Bibelwissenschaft* we just might hear the Teacher from Ecclesiastes once again.

If one looks at the current list of program units for the primary academic organization of North American biblical scholars, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), one notes a dizzying array of specializations, some focusing on content, others on approaches to the texts, and still others on the social/cultural location of interpreters. These program units also differ in whether they promote scholarship of highly specialized areas (e.g., “Early Exegesis of Genesis 1”) or broader contexts (e.g., “Greco-Roman Religions”).¹⁴ And, finally, reading through these program units one notes that twenty-first century biblical scholarship, heir to almost three centuries of diligent academic work, now has the luxury of breaking the meant/means dichotomy that early practitioners worked so hard to erect. Thus some scholars intentionally and clearly embrace a focus on the response of current readers to the text based on their location within multiple complex webs of identity formation that dominant groups can take for granted, but which historically marginalized voices must explicitly claim. As Steven McKenzie and Stephen Haynes noted already at the close of the twentieth century, “Scholars and scholarship in the field of biblical studies continue to diversify. [...] As the process of diversification continues into the future, the need for dialogue between different approaches to the Bible and their practitioners will be more acute.”¹⁵ The more specialized biblical studies gets, the more we stand in need of having productive conversations with one another—and with the larger academy.

The twin trends of twenty-first century biblical scholarship, digging down and reaching out, create a landscape that is shifting and unsettled. This current reality demands a principled means of engaging the texts, their original contexts, and the meanings communities have derived from them over the centuries. Brennen Breed has recently proposed that biblical scholars become “nomadologists.” He writes, “We study the text wherever it goes, from the ancient Near East to the present day, as it moves through a myriad of contexts, both at home everywhere and ultimately at home nowhere, with this question always in mind: What can these texts *do*?”¹⁶ Nyasha Junior correctly critiques Breed’s metaphor of the wandering text by noting that texts do not do things on their own, but, rather, “texts are repurposed, corralled, and coerced into new contexts.” For Junior, the important issue is to identify what *people* do with the texts, rather than assume passive communities upon whom the texts act. “Asking ‘how has this text functioned’ is a good question,” she argues, “but to ask ‘who has (re)used this text, how, and for what purpose’ identifies more clearly the particular interpreters and agendas behind these reinterpretations.”¹⁷ In short, what twenty-first century biblical scholarship needs are interpretive analytics that (1) make space for specialization that allows for close nuanced readings, (2) allow these readings to be put into meaningful conversation with colleagues in other areas of religious studies and the academy at large, and (3) take seriously the cultural hermeneutical space of the human beings who produced and who continue to make meaning of the texts.

Vernon K. Robbins argues that methods, as were developed over the past three centuries, are different from interpretive analytics, which are necessary for twenty-first academic work. “The philosophy of a method,” Robbins writes, “is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is ‘in something itself.’ In contrast, the philosophy of an interpretive analytic is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is exhibited in the way it relates to all other things. This is a difference between a philosophy of essence or substance and a philosophy of relations.”¹⁸ The interpretive analytic developed by Robbins, socio-rhetorical interpretation, can serve an example of the robust and variegated aspects of such a mode of analysis. The ever increasing specialization in various aspects of biblical scholarship, as mentioned above, also drives biblical scholars into conversation with others since any single scholar cannot do all things. Socio-rhetorical interpretation provides a principled means of entering into these conversations. As Robbins argues, socio-rhetorical interpretation:

invites methods and methodological results into the environment of its activities, but those methods and results are always under scrutiny. Using insights from sociolinguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, ethnography, literary studies, social sciences, cognitive science, and ideological studies, socio-rhetorical interpretation enacts an interactive interpretive analytic that juxtaposes and interrelates phenomena by drawing and redrawing boundaries of analysis and interpretation.¹⁹

In other words, the interpretive analytic that Robbins has developed enacts some of the very things that Breed’s proposed “nomadologists” are to perform in their analysis of biblical texts.

As initially developed at the end of the twentieth century, Robbins’s interpretive analytic explores multiple textures found in texts.²⁰ The textures socio-rhetorical interpretation programmatically analyzes are: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. An interpreter engaging inner texture stays within the boundaries of the text under consideration and examines what the language of the text is doing. Intertexture moves beyond the boundaries of the language and structure of the text itself and recognizes that biblical texts are dynamically related to phenomena outside of them. Social and cultural texture explores both the social and cultural background the producers of the text assume and the prescriptive social and cultural ordering those producers invite the audience to adopt. Ideological texture concerns both those who wrote the texts and the reception of texts by later interpretive communities, including the scholar analyzing the text. Sacred texture runs throughout the other four textures and enables an interpreter to analyze the specifically religious dimensions of the biblical texts. In this century, socio-rhetorical interpretation has moved into another phase of development that bolsters the analysis of textures by the insights of cognitive science, through the use of conceptual blending theory, and critical spatiality/geography theory.²¹ Thus not only does a

socio-rhetorical interpretive analytic push the biblical scholar to examine resources outside of the Bible itself, but it also enacts interdisciplinary investigations with ease. Such an interpretive analytic provides the nomadologist a programmatic means of investigating various ways texts are made meaningful by hearers/readers. As Junior reminds us, “nomadic peoples do not roam freely without purpose. They move intentionally.”²²

I have used the interpretive analytic of socio-rhetorical interpretation as an illustrative example because it is the exegetical environment in which I feel most at home as a scholar. It allows and encourages investigations into what a text meant in its ancient context as well as what it means to various reading communities through history. Or, in the words of Robbins, “The approach uses a transmodern philosophical position of relationism to interrelate ancient, modern and postmodern systems of thought with one another.”²³ And thus whereas I began this essay by holding up a German scholar as an example of important eighteenth century developments in biblical studies, I end by holding up a German-American biblical scholar as an example of someone who tries to practice an interpretive analytic that befits an interdisciplinary twenty-first century academy. Unfortunately, there is another similarity that has run through most of this essay. Even in a globalized, pluralistic twenty-first century world, biblical scholars still look overwhelmingly like Gabler and me: white, male, and Christian (broadly defined). As Jeremy Schipper notes, regarding the membership of SBL, “A 2014 Member Profile Report indicated that almost 89% of participants identify as of European/Caucasian descent and 76% identify as male.”²⁴ The astute reader will have noticed that I have cited the writing of only two women in this essay (Newsom and Junior) and only one, as far as I know, person of color (Junior). This is the reason for my deliberate use of the indefinite article in the subtitle of this piece. It is merely *a* story of biblical scholarship—one that conforms in many ways to what Junior refers to as the “‘standard’ narrative of biblical scholarship.”²⁵ This essay, then, is an example of the challenges faced by the guild of biblical scholars in this century. The stories of biblical scholarship told by women, persons of color, persons living outside of North America and Europe, persons whose sexual identities have historically been marginalized, and a whole host of others will undoubtedly look very different from my own. However, it is not my place to pretend to be able to tell their stories.

Notes

1. My ideas for this essay benefited greatly from discussion with colleagues at the annual meeting (March 12–13, 2015) of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society—especially Susan E. Haddox (University of Mount Union) and Bart B. Bruehler (Indiana Wesleyan University)—and the Spring collegium (March 13–14, 2015) of the Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity group—Vernon K. Robbins (Emory University), L. Gregory Bloomquist (Saint

Paul University/Université Saint-Paul), Sheila McGinn (John Carroll University), Roy Jeal (Booth University College), Alexandra Gruca-Macaulay (Saint Paul University/Université Saint-Paul), and Bart Bruehler.

2. Duncan 2011, 30.
3. See Baird 1992, 184–87.
4. See the recent essay by Brennen Breed wherein he uses the threefold distinction of Ricouer—“(1) the world behind the text, (2) the world in the text, and (3) the world in front of the text”—as his heuristic lens (Breed 2015). An example of how digital technology is helping scholarly conversations: I was alerted to the existence of this essay by reading a tweet posted by Nyasha Junior.
5. Baird 1992, xxii. Full disclosure: The New Testament program in the Graduate Division of Religion of Emory University (my alma mater) devotes a two-semester sequence to the history of interpretation in its curriculum. My training thus informs the significance I give to understanding the disciplinary background of biblical studies.
6. Hayes 1999.
7. Knight and Tucker 1985; Epp and MacRae 1989.
8. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992–2013). *Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen* (1992), *Volume Two: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (2002), and *Volume Three: From C.H. Dodd to Hans Dieter Betz* (2013). For the history of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament interpretation from antiquity through the twentieth century see the three volume collection edited by Magne Sæbø, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–2015).
9. Baird 1992, xiii.
10. Coogan 2010, 2221.
11. Newsom 2010, 2227.
12. See the editor’s preface in Epp and MacRae 1989, xxi.
13. See Newsom 2010, 2227, where she notes that “it is difficult to give a simple overview of the proliferating approaches to biblical studies since the 1970s.”

14. For a current list and description of the program units active for the 2015 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, see http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramUnits.aspx?MeetingId=27.
15. McKenzie and Haynes 1999, 3.
16. Breed 2015.
17. Junior 2015.
18. Robbins 2009, 5.
19. Robbins 2010, 192.
20. This initial development is explicated in Robbins 1996a and 1996b. My descriptions of the textures come from these volumes. See also Robbins 2010, 196 (Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/>).
21. Robbins 2010, 193.
22. Junior 2015.
23. Robbins 2010, 192.
24. Schipper 2015. He cites this member profile: <http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/memberProfileReport2014.pdf>.
25. Junior 2015.

Works Cited

- Baird, William. 1992. *History of New Testament Research, Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Breed, Brennen. 2015. "What Can Texts Do?: A Proposal for Biblical Studies." @ *This Point: Theological Investigations in Church and Culture* 10.1. <http://www.atthispoint.net/articles/what-can-texts-do-a-proposal-for-biblical-studies/262/>. Accessed March 19, 2015.
- Coogan, Michael D. 2010. "The Interpretation of the Bible from the Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries." In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. 4th ed. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Duncan, Glen. 2011. *The Last Werewolf*. New York: Knopf.
- Epp, Eldon J., and George W. MacRae, eds. 1989. *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*. SBLBMI 3. Atlanta: Scholar's Press.
- Hayes, John H., ed. 1999. *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. 2 vols. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Junior, Nyasha. 2015. "Re/Use of Texts." @ *This Point: Theological Investigations in Church and Culture* 10.1. <http://www.atthispoint.net/professional-responses/reuse-of-texts/265/>. Accessed March 19, 2015.
- Knight, Douglas A., and Gene M. Tucker, eds. 1985. *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*. SBLBMI 1. Atlanta: Scholar's Press.
- McKenzie, Steven L., and Stephen R. Haynes. 1999. "Forward to the Revised Edition." In *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*. Rev. and expanded ed. Eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.
- Newsom, Carol A. 2010. "Contemporary Methods in Biblical Study." In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. 4th ed. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Robbins, Vernon K. 1996a. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International.
- _____. 1996b. *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.
- _____. 2009. *The Invention of Christian Discourse, Volume I*. Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity 1. Blandford Forum, UK: Deo.
- _____. 2010. "Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation." In *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*. Ed. David E. Aune. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Schipper, Jeremy. 2015. "Do Biblical Scholars Make Ideal Nomadologists?" @ *This Point: Theological Investigations in Church and Culture* 10.1. <http://www.atthispoint.net/professional-responses/do-biblical-scholars-make-ideal-nomadologists/263/>. Accessed March 19, 2015.