

## Farewell to SBL: Faith and Reason in Biblical Studies

RONALD S. HENDEL



In recent years  
SBL has changed  
its position on  
the relationship  
between faith  
and reason, falling  
into dissension  
and hypocrisy.

“THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS, which reason does not know.” This famous line from Pascal’s *Pensées* draws a wise distinction between religious faith and intellectual inquiry. The two have different motivations and pertain to different domains of experience. They are like oil and water, things that do not mix and should not be confused. Pascal was a brilliant mathematician, and he did not allow his Catholic beliefs to interfere with his scholarly investigations. He regarded the authority of the Church to be meaningless in such matters. He argued that “all the powers in the world can by their authority no more persuade people of a point of fact than they can change it.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, facts are facts, and faith has no business dealing in the world of facts. Faith resides in the heart and in one’s way of living in the world.

In the same year as the appearance of the *Pensées* (1670), another book appeared that changed the practice of Biblical scholarship—Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*. In it he showed that the Bible can be the subject of systematic rational inquiry. In the course of his study, he gave persuasive reasons to show that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch. For this and other conclusions, Spinoza was branded a heretic and his book was widely condemned. But Biblical scholarship persisted, and over the last few centuries it has become a full-blooded academic field. Pascal would not have been happy with Spinoza’s conclusions, but in a curious way they agreed on the careful distinction between the paths of faith and reason.

Let’s fast forward to the present. My focus is the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the main organization for Biblical scholarship in North America. In recent years it has changed its position on the relationship between faith and reason in the study of the Bible. I think that it has forgotten the lessons of both Pascal and Spinoza, and is falling into a confused domain of dissension and hypocrisy. The problem, as I understand it, has to do with money.

SBL used to share its annual meeting with the major American organizations for Near Eastern archaeology (the American Schools of Oriental Research, ASOR) and for the study of religion (the American Association of Religion, AAR). But due to petty disputes among the leaders of these groups, ASOR and AAR have dissolved their links with SBL. In order to keep up its numbers at its annual meeting, SBL has reached out to evangelical and fundamentalist groups, promising them a place within the SBL meeting. So instead of distinguished academic

organizations like ASOR and AAR in the fold, we now have fundamentalist groups like the Society of Pentecostal Studies and the Adventist Society for Religious Studies as our intimate partners. These groups now hold SBL sessions at the annual meeting. The participation of these and other groups presumably boosts attendance—and SBL’s income—to previous levels.

What’s wrong with bringing in such groups? Well, some of them proselytize at the SBL meetings. One group invited some Jewish scholars to their session, asked them if they observed the Sabbath, and handed them materials intended to convert them. And recently the SBL online book review journal (*Review of Biblical Literature*) has featured explicit condemnations of the ordinary methods of critical scholarly inquiry, extolling instead the religious authority of orthodox Christian faith. Listen to this, from Bruce Waltke, widely regarded as the dean of evangelical Biblical studies:

By their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, [evangelical scholars] ... hear the voice of higher biblical criticism, which replaces faith in God’s revelation with faith in the sufficiency of human reason, as the grating of an old scratched record.<sup>2</sup>

This is a quaintly stated position, which directly attacks the applicability of human reason to the study of the Bible. Instead of reason, “faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”—as interpreted by evangelical scholars—should be the rule in Biblical scholarship. Waltke dismisses critical inquiry as an annoying nuisance, like the scratchy sound of an old LP. This is in the midst of a review of a brilliant scholarly commentary on the book of Proverbs, written by a Jewish scholar, in the Yale Anchor Bible series.

On the one hand, I give Waltke the respect he has earned as a scholar, and I am happy to listen to his views. But when he says such rationally absurd things as “the factual data validates Solomon’s authorship of Prov[erbs] 1:1–24:33” (which belongs to a post-Solomonic stratum of Hebrew, as Waltke ought to know), and when he asserts that Moses wrote the laws of Deuteronomy (which are written in post-Mosaic Hebrew), we are clearly not in the world of critical Biblical scholarship at all. This is religious dogma, plain and simple.

Why is this a problem? Certainly Waltke is entitled to his views. The problem is that the SBL has loosened its own definition of Biblical scholarship, such

CONTINUES ON PAGE 74

## Biblical Views

*continued from page 28*

that partisan attacks of this type are now entirely valid. When I learned of the new move to include fundamentalist groups within the SBL, I wrote to the director and cited the mission statement in the SBL's official history: "The object of the Society is to stimulate the critical investigation of the classical biblical literatures."<sup>3</sup> The director informed me that in 2004 the SBL revised its mission statement and removed the phrase "critical investigation" from its official standards. Now the

mission statement is simply to "foster biblical scholarship." So critical inquiry—that is to say, reason—has been deliberately deleted as a criterion for the SBL. The views of creationists, snake-handlers and faith-healers now count among the kinds of Biblical scholarship that the society seeks to foster.

The battle royal between faith and reason is now in the center ring at the SBL circus. While the cultured despisers of reason may rejoice—including some postmodernists, feminists<sup>4</sup> and eco-theologians—I find it dispiriting. I don't want to belong

to a professional society where people want to convert me, and where they hint in their book reviews that I'm going to hell. As a scholar of the humanities—and I might add, as a Jew—I do not feel at home in such a place. What to do? Well, I've let my membership in SBL lapse. Maybe that's a cowardly response, but sometimes, as Shakespeare wrote, "The better part of valor is discretion." Sometimes it's reasonable to avoid conflict. And like Pascal and Spinoza, I'm partial to reason in matters of scholarship. But my heart, for reasons of its own, gently grieves.

*Ronald S. Hendel is Norma and Sam Dabby Professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William B. Ashworth, Jr., "Catholicism and Early Modern Science," in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, review of Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (Anchor Yale Bible), in *Review of Biblical Literature* ([http://bookreviews.org/pdf/7219\\_7855.pdf](http://bookreviews.org/pdf/7219_7855.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> For a thoughtful critique of postmodernist and feminist critiques of reason, see Genevieve Lloyd, "Maleness, Metaphor, and the 'Crisis' of Reason," in Louise M. Anthony and Charlotte E. Witt, eds., *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2002), pp. 73–89. The conjunction of some postmodernists, feminists, and fundamentalists in this regard is, to put it mildly, ironic.

1/4  
p.74