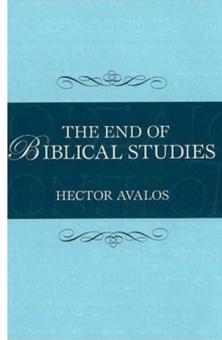


○ REVIEW OF HECTOR AVALOS, *THE END OF BIBLICAL STUDIES*

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Avalos states his aim in his opening sentence: ‘The only mission of biblical studies should be to end biblical studies as we know it,’ and expands on it in the first paragraph. Academic biblical studies is ‘primarily a religionist apologetic enterprise’ dedicated to ‘maintaining the value of the Bible.’ Biblical scholars are ‘still part of an ecclesial-academic complex’ (p. 15).

Concern with ecclesial influence and religionist tendencies in biblical studies and scholars is central to his thesis that biblical studies should come to a close. Religionism and religionist are two of his most frequent words. The influence is seen in the many and varied attempts, through translations, commentaries and such, to make the Bible relevant and meaningful to the modern age despite the fact that over two centuries of biblical studies have shown that the Bible is from a culture and age so far removed from ours that its worldview and values have no application today. He details his proposal in two major parts. Part One is an analysis of the methods and results of the subdisciplines of biblical studies, showing ‘how they conceal the irrelevance of the Bible’ (p. 35).

First is translation (pp 37–63). Avalos subtitles his chapter ‘Hiding in Plain Sense.’ He argues that ‘translations maintain the relevance of the Bible by distorting and even erasing what is said in the original languages’ (p. 37). He notes the translation spectrum from formal (word-for-word) to dynamic or functional equivalence. He discusses particular examples of the distortion from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament including more recent translations that attempt to be more gender inclusive. Second is textual criticism, “‘The Original Sin’” (pp 65–108), that has revealed the varied history of biblical manuscripts and shown how far we are from any original text of a biblical book or section, an autograph from the actual author(s). He concisely summarises the history of establishing accepted Hebrew and Greek texts, noting the composite nature of Greek New Testaments. Such results are troublesome for ‘those who believe they must have an accurate record of God’s word to guide the conduct of their lives’ (p. 65).

Third is 'History and Archaeology: Fields Full of Holes' (pp 109–84). The chapter is concerned with the Hebrew Bible and the debates about the history of Israel and the use of the Bible to write such a history. Avalos ranges from a philosophy of historiography – what counts as knowledge vs. supposition – to an in-depth discussion of the work of William Dever, a so-called maximalist, and the clashes with the minimalists such as Keith Whitelam and Philip Davies. He shows the conjectural nature of most, if not all, historical and archaeological reconstructions and makes the telling point that the maximalists, Dever in particular, have created a lot of their own problems by using terms such as 'certain,' 'secure' and 'knowledge' when 'possible,' 'tentative' and 'belief' would better fit the evidence. However, the chapter deals with too many issues and scholars and thereby lacks focus in treatment and conclusions.

Fourth is 'The Unhistorical Jesus' (pp 185–218) in which Avalos claims that attempts to isolate and describe the historical Jesus have not progressed much beyond Reimarus's attempts in the 18th century. Different Jesuses have been proposed – for example, the apocalyptic dreamer, the revolutionary and the peasant Jew – but with no new and decisive historical evidence. He analyses in some detail the Jesus Seminar's project and the often inconsistent use of their own criteria in deciding whether a saying derived or not from the historical Jesus. As with the history of Israel issues he does a fine job of showing how conjectural and limited are any historical reconstructions including the quests for the historical Jesus.

His fifth chapter, 'Literary Criticism: Aesthetics as Apologetics' (pp 219–47) is a short and rambling treatment of readings, mostly contemporary, of the Hebrew Bible, whether the narrative or the poetry. He does briefly review previous works on Hebrew poetry including Philo and Lowth. His criticism is mainly directed at those who claim special beauty, creativity and aesthetic allure for the narrative and poetry and relate this to the continued relevance of the Bible and the need to foster more reading of the Bible. He does not discuss the commentaries and works that present literary readings of biblical material and that make no claims for special literary value or merit.

Chapter six, the last in Part One of the book, is 'Biblical Theology: The Pathology of Bibliolatry' (pp 249–87), a discussion and critique of Eichrodt, Brueggemann, Levenson and feminist and liberation theologians. His criticisms are familiar, particularly that there is no central concept or concepts to the Bible, whether the Jewish or Christian, and I found this chapter a very weak part of his presentation.

Part Two, on the Infrastructure of Biblical Studies, comprises three short chapters on 'Academia: Religionism by Degrees' (pp 291–305), 'The Society of Biblical Literature' (pp 307–24) and 'The Media-Publishing Complex' (pp 325–37). Avalos wants to show how all three areas work, whether together or separately, to maintain interest in the Bible, in its study and in its relevance. The interests and influence of these professional areas and organisations have been an undercurrent throughout Avalos's book. At the outset he asserts 'we will show how academia, despite claims to independence, is still part of an ecclesial-academic complex that collaborates with a competitive media industry' (p. 15). For me these three areas are far too diverse and changing in their makeup and their impact to be dealt with so briefly and Avalos does not do them justice.

Avalos addresses many issues and audiences in this book. I focus on a few topics and aspects of his work, both in terms of strengths and weaknesses. In Part One he provides a readable in-

roduction to central issues involved in the historical study of the Bible whether the history of the text – textual criticism and translation – or the history of Israel and the quest for the historical Jesus. His main targets are the major disciplines of traditional historical criticism and his critique is solid and familiar: text criticism deals with manuscripts and scribal traditions, not original autographs; translation is ideologically driven and often obscures the original text; and historical studies and archaeology cannot produce the assured results, a history of Israel or the historical Jesus, that they too often claim to do. But whether this calls necessarily for an end to biblical studies is another matter.

For me Avalos points more to the changing direction and interests of biblical studies than to any total end. In his opening proclamation the operative phrase is ‘biblical studies as we know it’ or have known it, not simply biblical studies. Such change and redirection have been the nature of academic biblical studies since its inception and many traditionalists and conservatives have resisted and even denied these studies and their results. Avalos notes the latter in his frequent citation of self-described fundamentalists or evangelicals who argue that we do have reliable access to ancient Israel, the historical Jesus and the original texts of the biblical writers. However, he does not engage this very contentious state of contemporary biblical studies.

Nor does he discuss in any depth the growing number of studies and readings that employ one or more of a wide range of critical approaches that are often gathered under the umbrella of postmodernism and each of which is itself an umbrella term. His analysis of Brueggemann does touch on the postmodern and he charges feminists with being part of the attempt to rescue the relevance of the Bible. Some of these approaches are used on their own or in concert with others, including historical interests: literary, sociological, ideological, psychoanalytical, postcolonial and queer. Except for his critique of Levenson’s turn to the wealth of past interpretations, Avalos does not mention the burgeoning interest in the history of the reading and appropriation of the Bible in Jewish, Christian and secular sources witnessed in individual works and in series such as the Blackwell Bible Commentaries Through the Centuries. These are fascinating looks into the afterlives of biblical texts.

None of these more recent interests and approaches fit within traditional historical criticism. History of Israel, of Jesus and the early church and of the text are not central concerns, if concerns at all. There are many detailed and nuanced readings of biblical narrative and poetry from different vantage points that do not ask whether these texts are historically reliable or not and that do not attempt to date them to one particular time. Moreover, many of them claim no special authority, meaning or relevance for the Bible beyond its status as a cultural icon of the past and present. (I speak in general terms since I have no idea of how many is this ‘many.’) They study the Bible and what others have said of it because of an interest in and a fascination with the matters themselves and not because the Bible has a particular message or word for contemporary society. In this sense Avalos is right: biblical studies as we have known it has come to an end.

He is accurate in describing biblical scholars as a small and elite group who have the skills and time to pursue such esoteric studies and a group largely supported by teaching positions in both religious and secular institutions. This is not new since few in any age could afford the time and expense of learning the languages and other skills and then applying them. And he is also probably right in saying that the group is shrinking because of decreasing opportunities to teach biblical studies, especially in secular universities, and thereby to have the support and time to pursue these interests. This is an ongoing change in biblical studies as we know it.

As for his abiding concern with the many ways that people, not just scholars, attempt to show the relevance of the Bible for modern life, this also is not new and I would think started within days of the writing down of a biblical text. The Bible, as any text, is already dated once written – it is always already from the past and not relevant to the present – and any relevance or contemporary meaning demands interpretation and application and, at least until the modern era, the history of the reading and interpretation of the Bible is largely a matter of the incredible number of ways that people have found to wrest meaning and relevance from the text. In as much as academic and ‘objective’ biblical studies are veiled attempts to prove or legitimate such relevance they need to be subjected to this manner of searching critique and they are. One has only to read the articles and book reviews in this online journal, *The Bible and Critical Theory*, to get an introduction to the extent of this genre of critique. There are only scattered hints in Avalos that such endeavours exist. Indeed he leaves his reader with the strong impression that only religionists read the Bible and then only to find a contemporary meaning.

On the one hand Avalos is too limited in his topics since he excludes so much of what is included in the contemporary reading and study of the Bible. On the other hand he includes too much by treating topics, such as in Part Two, that are tangential to his main arguments and by treating them with little detail. Although the declared target of his critique is biblical studies and academic scholars, he casts a broad net to catch all who find any meaning or relevance in the Bible and indeed any who believe ‘religion is essentially good and necessary for a productive human life’ (p. 340). Many others have criticised the religious influences, positive and negative, of schools, societies, publishers, film makers and all believers, but for Avalos to attempt it in this one book detracts from his main project and saps much of its strength.