

Review of Roland Boer, ed., *Secularism and Biblical Studies*. Biblical World Series. Sheffield, England, and Oakland, CT: Equinox, 2010.

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The essays in this book collect and preserve a contested moment in the life of the Society of Biblical Literature at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At issue is the role, if any, of biblical scholars' religious commitments in their scholarship. Consisting of an introduction and four sections, the book includes the two essays originally posted on the SBL Forum website in 2006 that got this debate started, papers from two sessions at the 2006 International SBL meeting in Edinburgh, and further essays commissioned for this book. Two brief indices, of biblical references and subjects respectively, conclude the book. "Secularism" and "Biblical Studies" are the organizing themes bringing these essays together, but the debate over disciplinary boundaries past, present, and future plays out along the way.

Roland Boer's "Introduction: Secularism and the Bible" introduces the book. Writing with his usual wit, Boer sets out two groups of issues related to the question, "What is secular biblical criticism?" Those issues concern, firstly, definitions of secularism and, secondly, the nature of the different trends within biblical criticism and their relations with secularism. He then anticipates the essays in the book, pointing out that secularism itself is a contested field and so the essays themselves function as a series of examples of that contest. Additionally, Boer notes that after the events of September 11, 2001, the Bible has become a regular topic in public discourse, especially in the United States, a circumstance requiring answers from biblical scholars with respect to the relevance of the Bible to contemporary realities. He then surveys areas of debate within Biblical Studies, one of which includes the debate over secularism and Biblical Studies.

The first section of the book, "Initial Engagement at the Forum," contains two slightly revised essays from the SBL Forum. "Scholarship and Faith in Bible Study," by Michael V. Fox, issues a call for the removal of "faith-based study" of the Bible from academic scholarship. Jacques Berlinerblau's essay "The Unspeakable in Biblical Scholarship" addresses the untenable (in his view) reality of biblical scholars having religious commitments while they undertake scholarly work. Most problematic in this regard are scholars who do not acknowledge how their personal religious commitments shape their professional work.

The second section, "The Manifesto Debate," publishes papers from one of the sessions at the ISBL in Edinburgh. Roland Boer's "A Manifesto for Biblical Studies" leads off this section, calling for the liberation of Biblical Studies from the control of church and state. In keeping with the "manifesto" genre, Boer provides an argument for how this should be done, in institutional, disciplinary, and political terms. Hanna Stenström's essay "Boer's *Manifesto*: Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem? Some Reflections from a Swedish Perspective" is in general agreement with Boer's call, but wonders to what extent it is "in tension with its own political stance" (p. 42). In "Guns do not kill, people do!," Niels Peter Lemche supports Boer's call for the removal of religion, religious people, and religious institutions from Biblical Studies, because religious people are the source of the problem: they are the "people" of his title, who retard developments in scholarship. Mark G. Brett, in "Theological Secularity: A Response to Roland Boer," considers contexts other than the United States and Australia to argue that Boer goes too far. Better, in his view, is an alliance between secular and theological commitments, presuming that such alliances further causes of justice in the world. Finally, Todd Penner's "Is Boer Among the Prophets? Transforming the Legacy of

Marxian Critique” raises questions about what a Marxian interpretation of the Bible and Biblical Studies might mean for the world today. Citing Talal Asad, he notes that secularism can be as controlling of scholars and scholarship as can religion.

“The End of Biblical Studies?,” the book’s third section, is based on the other ISBL session in Edinburgh, in which Hector Avalos’ essay, “The End of Biblical Studies as a Moral Obligation,” was the focus. Avalos calls for the end of Biblical Studies as currently known and configured, given the irrelevance of the Bible for contemporary society and social ills. Decentering the Bible will enable biblical scholars to work on other Near Eastern texts currently languishing from lack of attention and resources. Responses to Avalos come from Joseph A. Marchal, “Responsibilities to the Publics of Biblical Studies and Critical Rhetorical Engagements for a Safer World”; Heike Omerzu, “A German Landscape: Currents and Credits of New Testament Studies in Germany During the Past Decades”; and Philip Chia, “Private or Public? The Challenge of Public Theology to Biblical Studies.” All three take a less pessimistic view of Biblical Studies. Marchal considers how past and current scholarship uses the Bible to engage and critique social abuses, while calling for further “ethical-political engagement and assessment” by the use of “a transdisciplinary practice” (p. 102) that would enable biblical scholars to be responsible to a wider public than just the “religious.” Omerzu argues that globalization and pluralization have impoverished biblical scholarship, especially in Germany, and only through interdisciplinary and international dialogue (not mission) with the non-Christian world can this impoverishment be overcome. Chia, writing in Hong Kong, assumes what he terms a “global market perspective” to consider who has been served by biblical scholarship, who has benefited from it, and whether that market is growing or shrinking. He concludes that Biblical Studies must become relevant to public life on a global scale, and that hermeneutics is central to achieving this end.

The fourth and final section, “The Paradoxes of Secularism,” consists of essays commissioned specifically for this volume. Ward Blanton’s “Neither Religious nor Secular: On Saving the Critic in Biblical-Criticism” deconstructs the categories “secular” and “religious,” which he claims are inextricably caught up within Western hegemony. Biblical criticism should no longer define itself using these terms, instead opening itself up to new ways of thinking and being as a discipline. Edgar W. Conrad’s “From Jefferson’s Bible to Judge Moore’s Ten Commandments Monument: Secularizing the Bible in the USA” considers instances of the public use of the Bible and biblical texts in the United States and how they are at odds with the claims made about those uses. Athalya Brenner’s “From Ruth to Foreign Workers in Contemporary Israel: A Case Study in the Interaction of Religion, Politics and the Economy” uses Ruth as a means of understanding the current situation of immigrant workers in Israel, and vice versa. Yairah Amit, in “The Samaritans — Biblical Considerations in the Solution of a Political Problem,” examines the Bible’s views on Samaritans and its role in changing views of Samaritans in modern Israel. The section concludes with Philip Davies’ essay, “The Biblical Roots of Secularism,” in which he argues that the Bible is the source of secularism, with the New Testament being unanimous on this score, and the Hebrew Bible being more divided.

The essays in this book are, for the most part, readable and appropriate for use in an advanced undergraduate or graduate course interested in the current shape of Biblical Studies. A number of issues related to Biblical Studies emerge in these essays, including the use of multiple interpretive methodologies; competition between different scholarly identities and institutional locations; the past and future of Biblical Studies; social justice; and global perspectives. Considering the book as a whole, two issues stand out for me. First, the essays are markedly one-sided. The essays by Fox and Berlinerblau generated a highly charged debate within the SBL, but the fullness of that debate is not in evidence here. Although not all the authors in this book are convinced of the need for what Fox terms the “full secularization” of biblical criticism, this book is nonetheless a strong statement toward that end. That being said, I accept Boer’s decision to present only one side of the debate,

since this leaves room for those on the other side to publish a corresponding collection of essays making their case.

Secondly, the contestation of disciplinary boundaries permeates the book. While reading it I found myself thinking about Michel Foucault's work in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* on how academic disciplines developed in the western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For some time I have thought that the discipline of Biblical Studies would lend itself well to a Foucauldian archaeological analysis, in which would be examined such questions as: what is the object(s) of study in "Biblical Studies" or "biblical criticism"? Who undertakes such study and by what means or qualifications? What questions are studied, and who speaks for the discipline? There is a good deal of anxiety and concern expressed in *Secularism and Biblical Studies* over just these types of issues. The nature of the discipline and particularly its boundaries are very much at play, both in terms of a (cherished?) past and an uncertain future (a lament for the past glories and relevance of biblical scholarship within public discourses is evident throughout the essays). That being said, the authors in *Secularism and Biblical Studies* do not advocate an "anything goes" stance for Biblical Studies as a discipline. On the contrary, they clearly want to have boundaries around it; those boundaries, defined by "secularism," simply lie along different lines than the ones proposed by their opponents.



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