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# A Response to Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*

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Is the field of Biblical Studies, its scholars, institutions, and media-publishing network maintained by religionist concerns? Hector Avalos believes it is, and I register a hardy amen. Given the contemporary religious significance of what we study, one could hardly expect it to be otherwise.

Hector, however, goes on to accuse biblical scholars of perpetuating the importance of Biblical Studies for purely selfish reasons – their own employment – despite the fact that the Bible and every sub-discipline within Biblical Studies are intellectually moribund or dishonest, irreparably tainted by religious concerns, totally irrelevant to modern life, and worthless for the improvement of humanity. Although I agree in principle that scholars must place their field under scrutiny from time to time and Hector therefore offers a potential service to us, I cannot agree with his thoroughly negative assessment.

Hector boldly concludes that the most responsible thing biblical scholars can do with their training is to *end* Biblical Studies *as presently practiced* and reorient the field so as to make the educating of people about the foreignness and irrelevance of the Bible their primary goal until lack of interest in the biblical text eventually carries the field into oblivion. In other words, all biblical scholars should be idealistic atheists like Hector with a Kevorkian approach to the field. I am an agnostic. I agree with Hector in principle that the best human future does not include scriptural guidance. I also agree that biblical scholars ought to make the complexities of Scripture known to students and the public, despite the theological or religious consequences. But, I am troubled by

Hector's absolutist approach that denies any positive role for Scripture among scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Rarely do we find a book so harshly critical of our field, our livelihood, and I dare say our collective intellectual integrity. Written by one of our own, the book may be seen by some as a professional betrayal of an angry scholar.

Furthermore, rarely do we find a book in Biblical Studies with as blatantly an atheistic orientation as Hector's. The book could be read as a guide to losing one's faith while studying the Bible – probably one of its goals. In a field that we all know is mostly populated by devotees of some biblically-informed or -influenced faith, the book goes explicitly against the grain and does so in terms too close to many biblical scholars' religious identity for comfort. Condemnation on religious grounds from some scholars, at least, is assured.

Now in the animal world, when a beast threatens the herd, instinct incites a reaction that will promote the chances of survival. Despite the fact that numerological study indicates the name "Hector Avalos" equals 666, and thus some may feel there is divine warrant to react against the Hector biblio-beast, I'm going to suggest we rise above our instincts, resist demonizing our colleague, and take one of the central accusations in the book to heart, namely, that Biblical Studies is inextricably enmeshed with religionist concerns. Despite problems with this book, if it gets us to start explicitly talking about this issue as a field, not as a

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<sup>6</sup> Most of my professional interests are historical in nature with little concern for making a direct connection between the content of my study and contemporary or theological issues. (Developing pedagogical tools for teaching is one exception. But see also just below.) Call me an elitist, but I happen to think that even the most obscure cul-de-sacs of Humanities – has anyone ever heard of Assyriology? – have a place in human civilization. I also believe, however, that part of my job as a biblical scholar, especially in the classroom and to some extent in the public sphere, is to challenge facile, uncritical, or oppressive understandings of Scripture. If that means rocking a theological boat or challenging my colleagues, then so be it. (This is the other exception to my propensity for historicism.) In principle, then, I agree with Hector calling our field to account. I just do not agree with most of his assessments or ultimate recommendation.

group of people with various metaphysical beliefs but as a premier learned society that should hold its members to the highest scholarly ideals, then it will have served a purpose.

Before elaborating on this, however, I want to point out three serious problems with *The End of Biblical Studies* that I am afraid will deter biblical scholars from seriously reflecting upon this one point that I think the book highlights.<sup>7</sup>

1. Hector has failed to deliver his message to its proper audience, biblical scholars, and thereby weakened the effectiveness of his book.

Given its stated purpose, there is a fundamental problem with the book's implied audience. Is Hector addressing scholars and their institutional/media publishing support base, the very people he most needs to convince to end, that is, to change Biblical Studies? If so, the book belabors points about the Bible that are common knowledge among this crowd. For example, are scholars really unaware that translations contain theological biases, especially ones related to relevancy? It is right, I think, to call attention to the issue of intellectual honesty, the need to eschew theological bias, and the problem of paternalism in translations, but this chapter is not writing to encourage self-awareness in scholars. Ending with the words "(m)istranslation is . . . often the goal of all biblical translations" (58),<sup>8</sup> the chapter incites a near paranoid-level of distrust not only of biblical translations but of biblical scholars. I think this is misrepresentation and some might suggest

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<sup>7</sup> There are a number of details of interpretation in this book that a reviewer might dispute. But as there is no new biblical research, I feel no need to pick at these details. The book is an argument that draws on what is already known in order to establish the need for a tectonic shift within the field. My response is focused on that broader goal of the book.

<sup>8</sup> It may be more appropriate to say that mistranslation, for a variety of reasons, is often the case or a problem in many biblical translations. Perhaps I am naïve, but Hector's statement sounds too conspiratorial and too monolithic.

border-line collective libel. Also, Hector takes several pages in most chapters to rehearse basics about each sub-discipline – do we need a lesson in textual criticism? – and frequently peppers the text with statements that are superfluous to scholarly readers, even to the point of annoyance. For example, do scholars need to be informed that Michael Coogan is “a (widely) respected biblical scholar” (17, 258) and Frank Moore Cross “is one of the most prominent biblical scholars alive” (228). Clearly, biblical scholars are not the primary implied audience in the text, even though, as our meeting at the colloquium and a number of biblio-blogs indicate, the book is most obviously relevant to scholars in the field. Given its stated goal, the book *should have been* written directly to scholars and published by a scholarly press. The fact that it wasn’t is one of the book’s great mistakes.

Is Hector addressing the interested lay person, then? Given the fact that he has published the book with Prometheus Books, a strongly atheistic publishing house, one can hardly believe he is writing for a religionist audience, a group of people, according to him, that most need convincing of the Bible’s irrelevancy.<sup>9</sup> Even if the book does provide persuasive reasons for abandoning biblically-based faith, how many people holding such faith will buy it for themselves? And how many of those who somehow come into possession of the book will get beyond the brash Introduction before setting it aside?

What about secular lay readers? Might they be the book’s implied audience? This is probably the best bet, but is there really much of a market for this book among interested lay readers who have *no* biblically-based faith but sufficient interest in Biblical Studies as a field to care about its future direction? If Hector is writing the book to them, it seems that he is undermining his own goal of helping the field fade away

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<sup>9</sup> Hector’s statements about the Bible’s irrelevance for believers today understates just how many contemporary individuals still read the Bible for guidance. See Christopher Heard’s comments on this topic.

into obscurity by preaching to the converted. Why bring up the Bible at all to such an audience? I suspect therefore that the book is actually aimed at a subset of secular readers, namely, apostate Christian atheists who would relish a thorough articulation of why the Bible and its scholarship are irrelevant nowadays. This explains not only the anti-Bible but also anti-religion stance throughout the book. The fact that atheistic blogs like infidelguy.com are featuring interviews with Hector speaks reams.

I don't have a problem with biblical scholars writing books for atheists. But, for a book that wants to reform our profession, one wonders why he has chosen to write to such a niche audience and not more directly to us, his colleagues, those of us standing accused.<sup>10</sup>

2. The take-no-prisoners tone of this book and its impoverished view of the role of scholarship in society, though implied only, make it very difficult to read the book as a serious attempt to change Biblical Studies as a field. It certainly does not reach out to biblical scholars to change their ways.

I think the ubiquitous use of the words "end" and "irrelevant" promotes an inflammatory style throughout the book,<sup>11</sup> implies a

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<sup>10</sup> Hector has objected to my audience analysis, asserting that the book was written for scholars, and even citing the many technical details in the book that only a scholar would understand. True enough. But this objection only confirms how clouded the implied audience really is. See also my second point below.

<sup>11</sup> The accusation that biblical scholars are guilty of "bibliolatry," a disparaging comment used throughout the book, is another example of over-the-top inflammatory rhetoric. Although it is sophomoric, I have to point out that Hector's use of this term, ironically, actually affirms the fact that the Bible continues to be a relevant source for generating linguistic expressions (one must assume the biblical notion that idolatry is bad in order for the term to have its full, derogatory semantic effect). Thus, his use of it aides and abets the Bible's continued influence on our linguistic repertoire. If Biblical Studies is going to end, such phrases should be excised from common usage, especially among scholars, lest such phrases incite a curiosity into their origin.

utopian or naïve conception of scholarship generally that Hector cannot possibly really mean (it undermines his own book!), and, most importantly, hides what is at the heart of Hector's project. Concerning the last of these, what Hector *really* wants to end is biblical authority's hold over humanity, as the conclusion makes quite clear (342). Biblical Studies, which he thinks currently aides and abets biblical authority, must change as a field in order to accomplish that goal.<sup>12</sup> So why talk about the *end of Biblical Studies* at all? Why not call the book *The Brave New Future of Biblical Studies* instead? Furthermore, why advocate such an extreme idealistic position, or rather, imposition, when rejection is assured by nearly all biblical scholars with a religious commitment – who are fully within their religious freedom to study the good book? It's simply inflammatory.

As for irrelevance, Hector defines the word explicitly in terms of a modern value judgment, that is, he deems “a biblical concept or practice that is no longer viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical” as irrelevant. This again is clearly linked to Hector's project against biblical authority since he thinks the entire Bible is irrelevant in this sense. But obviously one can maintain that the content of a text or anything that one might study under the umbrella of the Humanities is out-dated or inhumane or even evil while at the same time insisting that its study as a human cultural artifact has something to teach us about human creativity, barbarity, gullibility, or stupidity. So his concern about ethical irrelevance seems, well, irrelevant.

But Hector also loosens his notion of “irrelevance” at times to condemn Biblical Studies as an elite leisurely pursuit – a socio-economic judgment that does not ring true with my personal experience so far. Useless in the alleviation of human suffering and guilty of foisting a self-

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<sup>12</sup> Even if Hector's idea were somehow enforced or effected, biblical scholars may rest assured, like Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:19), that the extinction event does not lie within their own generation.

serving, implicitly hegemonic agenda on those who will *or must* listen (those poor college students trapped in my classroom!), Hector believes biblical scholars offer no positive practical benefits for humanity (see 321 for a particularly strong statement). Whether or not Hector would actually extend this kind of accusation to other scholars in the Humanities is moot for our purposes here.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, we need not labor the obvious point that scholars offer a democratic society a number of very important services, ranging from appreciation of our common humanity to trenchant criticism of social ills.<sup>14</sup> Let us remain focused on what Hector does say. Offering a preemptive rebuttal to the charge of anti-intellectualism (24) and denying a Marxist agenda (23), Hector does not in fact reject all of Biblical Studies—despite its roots in religionism; rather, he damns *present day* biblical scholars as practicing “false intellectualism and intellectual dishonesty” because they are protecting instead of exposing the Bible and the theologically troubling implications of biblical scholarship. They are caretakers, not critics.<sup>15</sup> The field by and large promotes, he asserts, a religionist agenda instead of a truly critical perspective. Moreover, as all the important discoveries have been made, Hector claims scholars are now mainly just going

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<sup>13</sup> The claim that Biblical Studies is detracting from the study of thousands of other ancient texts currently suffering from scholarly neglect (24, 29, 341) would seem to count against this view. What is somewhat humorous about this example, of course, is that many of these texts, as the catalogs indicate, are rather mundane economic documents that most people, including the few scholars studying them, would deem irrelevant to the problems or concerns of the modern world.

<sup>14</sup> I find the constant berating of scholarship as an elite leisurely pursuit and part of a hegemonic apparatus as facile at best or utopian at worst. Hector admits that all views are hegemonic at their base. I agree. But, I think scholars and artists tend to be the people most self-aware and critical of how accepted views feed a dominant hegemony. Thus, despite scholars being part of the creation of, say, a form of cultural hegemony, they are also often among its most vocal critics. See below.

<sup>15</sup> Here I am adapting the title of Russell McCutcheon’s book *Critics not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001).



through the motions of scholarship to maintain the status quo.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there is good reason to pay special attention to the Biblical Studies brand of uselessness within the Humanities and bring it to an end. As he would say, we brought it upon ourselves; we just won't admit it. Even if one partially agrees with Hector that there are some problems in the field, some dead weight – and we will all judge that differently in terms of both people, content, and practices, of course, Hector's conclusion that there is nothing new to be learned and that the field has duplicitous motives is overstated.

Despite their attempt to be self-critical, scholars are not above the inevitable influence of the on-going give-and-take that is social formation. But just as some scholars allow cultural (in which I include “religious”) influences to shape their scholarship uncritically, other scholars are among the first people to call attention to this. With regard to fields of knowledge, it is often the case that the most ardent critics of a specialized field of knowledge come from within the very same field being criticized (as even Hector shows, 22–23). In this sense, I'd say Hector's work, although clearly over-blown, provides an opportunity for us to reflect on how and why Biblical Studies conducts itself in the fashion that it does. He has derided us publicly and inappropriately, in my opinion, and he counsels death rather than convalescence, but we might still learn something from him, especially, in my opinion, about our scholarly field's relationship to contemporary religion.

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<sup>16</sup> Did the critical method not affect theological syntheses of the 20th century? And more recently, have not the revisions to Pauline theology challenged Protestant theological understandings of justification by faith, first formulated during the Reformation? Even within faith communities, then, Biblical Studies has had an impact. Many within the more conservative denominations do their best to ignore the implications of such studies – often to no avail. Scholars are the ones who both create the theological crises and attempt to come up with new formulations that solve the very problems they create. Hector only focuses on the latter, apologetic function.

3. It is no surprise to biblical scholars that every sub-discipline of Biblical Studies has been touched or shaped by religious concerns in some way. But why does Hector choose a fellow secular humanist's work as evidence of this tendency in the field in the longest chapter of the book?

I am referring to the chapter on archaeology and history. Sections of the chapter contain useful inter-disciplinary perspectives on some issues that I thoroughly enjoyed. For example, Hector looks briefly at the epistemological foundations of historiographical claims, reviewing the ideas of Keith Windschuttle through a case study in the historiography of Augustus Caesar's death. He also makes an interesting appeal to Arthurian historiography as a means to gain some perspective on biblical historiography. We could all learn something by occasionally reflecting on and re-assessing the philosophical basis for what we do and by looking at how other, related fields do what they do. But this inter-disciplinary material is embedded in a chapter dedicated to a sustained critique of one particular scholar, William Dever, which does not seem to fit comfortably into the broader agenda of the book.

In essence Hector holds Dever to a very high standard of what constitutes "knowledge" and claims Dever's archaeological analyses, while inveighing against minimalists and their postmodernism, are not much different than the minimalists themselves. Rejecting its postmodernist assumptions, minimalism, according to Hector, is the only rational position with regard to biblical history.

There's nothing wrong in principle with this conclusion, in my opinion, even if one may disagree with the details. But why this whole chapter is so fixated on tearing down Dever was quite puzzling to me as I read it. Hector quotes Dever himself at the beginning of the chapter to the effect that biblical archaeology, that is, archaeology that exists in order to support or prove the historicity of the Bible, is essentially dead (109).

Moreover, Hector reports up front that Dever holds very little of the Bible as historically accurate and describes Dever as a secular humanist without a religionist agenda (III). So, again, I am puzzled about how this chapter contributes to establishing the irrelevance of a “biblical archaeology” that has already been redefined (and still being practiced!) or proves “biblical archaeology” has a religionist agenda.<sup>17</sup>

Of course there are people who still use archaeology as an apologetic tool and thus have a strong religionist motivation (just as there are scholars using translations, literary studies, and textual criticism for the same purpose).<sup>18</sup> But why not go after them instead of Dever? Other chapters in the book show no shortage of examples, especially from Fundamentalists and Evangelicals.

I hardly need say that the conversation between Hector and Dever throughout the chapter shows how archaeology could undermine biblical authority as conceived by, say, an Evangelical Christian. So it is easy to see what the chapter contributes to that part of his agenda. Also, Hector is correct, as Dever knew a long time ago, that many of the best supporters for Syro-Palestinian or “biblical archaeology” are religionists.<sup>19</sup> Finally, maximalists, a good number of whom are religionists, see Dever as an ally in their fight with the minimalists. So one might think undermining the position of the best representative of a group (Dever) to erode ideas of an associated group (religious

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<sup>17</sup> Hector has objected that a re-assessment of Dever is overdue and that several of the scholars building on his ideas have also gone unanswered. So the chapter, he states, is filling a gap in the literature. I do not doubt this. Nevertheless, the chapter does not sit well within the book as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> I must interject here that Hector’s analysis of literary studies of the Bible, though not without problems, is absolutely correct with regard to the apologetic interests of *many* of its practitioners. When I was in seminary (1993–97), literary studies of the Bible were the rage. Such studies consciously eschewed the problematic historical aspects of the text – I was *never* introduced in class to the standard source critical approach to the Pentateuch – and focused on the inherent beauty and complexity of the biblical materials.

<sup>19</sup> See 328–331 for Hector’s discussion of *Biblical Archaeology Review* and its subscriber base, which is comprised of mostly Bible-believing Christians.

maximalists) is a good strategy. But it is a *non sequitur*. Even if Dever believes that his profession is dependent for its funding on Bible believers<sup>20</sup> and maintains that some of the biblical narrative finds a connection to archaeology (Hector does too!), pointing out problems in an atheistic archaeologist's reconstruction of ancient Israel hardly provides solid evidence for Hector's charge that professional, high-level archaeology of the biblical lands is permeated with religionism.<sup>21</sup> One gets the impression that Hector is playing the hero here, engaging in an intellectual gladiatorial battle with his former master to prove his superiority – something he has criticized other scholars for doing (315).

It is only in the summary and conclusion of this chapter that Hector makes the religionism connection, and the connection is superficial at best.<sup>22</sup> Citing a young archaeologist's plea for new approaches to integrating archaeology with the Bible, whose work is published in a very conservative archaeological publication edited by Hoffmeier and Millard,<sup>23</sup> Hector in essence says, See, here's evidence of just how desperate biblical archaeology is to make itself relevant to religionists.

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<sup>20</sup> Need we accuse Assyriology of religionism because some scholars have accepted funding from Assyrian Christians? Anyone who knows that field will get a good laugh out of that idea.

<sup>21</sup> Hector writes about the illegitimacy of psychoanalyzing ancient scribes for text critical purposes (92), and he decries the poor state of a field that “cannot settle arguments by much beyond psychoanalysis of opponents” (127), and then goes on to tell us on the same page that the self-avowed atheist Bill Dever constructs his idea of ancient Israel “on the basis of his own social history,” which seems to be an implicit assertion that Dever's Christian past continues to affect his archaeological work. Now who's psychoanalyzing?

<sup>22</sup> I am aware that there is some mention of religionism in connection with forged artifacts (145), but it is not substantive enough to connect the chapter to the broader themes of the book.

<sup>23</sup> See 184, n.263, which gives the bibliographical information as: Andrew G. Vaughn, “Can We Write a History of Israel Today?” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 385. For a review of the entire volume, which also highlights its conservative tendencies, see [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4521\\_4582.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4521_4582.pdf), accessed on November 21, 2007.

What does this really have to do with Dever? Why not take on Hoffmeier and Millard or the quoted archaeologist, instead?

This whole chapter suggests Hector is on a campaign to purge even his own “team” (secularists) of any tendencies to utilize the Bible in a positive fashion. This radical revolutionary-style stance is overly rigid, alienating, and unfortunate for those of us who would like to see change in the profession.

There are other points that one might address, but I think I have done enough criticism. I’d like now to consider what Hector can teach us. In order to do so, let us consider an explicitly reader-centered approach to interpreting Hector’s book. Instead of reading the book as Hector intends us to, as an absolute demand to change the discipline, let us consider it as protest literature that impractically demands a mile in the hopes of gaining an inch. Herein lies the pedagogical value of *The End of Biblical Studies*.

It is clear that Biblical Studies can be influenced by contemporary religion. But a ban on religion among biblical scholars is impractical, as if that could happen (!), and inappropriate. But we can demand a rigorous and unrelenting self-critical stance for all of us wishing to be called a scholar rather than, e.g., minister, adherent, proselytizer, or profiteer of religious trivia and paraphernalia. We can also take steps to insure that the Society of Biblical Literature disassociates itself officially from such religious insider concerns.

Unlike almost every other field in the humanistic academy, Biblical Studies is viewed as a religious, theological, apologetic, and broadly sectarian pursuit. It’s obvious why this is: despite our liberal and critical leanings, Biblical Studies is still dominated by scholars, schools, and publishers who are or serve adherents of a religion somehow based on the book we all study. Moreover, many of the students that enter our classroom do so for religious reasons. We all know this; and nearly all of us believe religious biblical scholars have every right to serve their

religious communities. But I think it is time (again?) to consider what this means for the Society of Biblical Literature, the umbrella organization for biblical scholars and the field's premier learned society.

How do we define our collective goals and create guidelines *as a learned society* so that we can all participate in the Society without allowing religious views to shape our collective identity as a learned society, without losing credibility among other ACLS societies, and without completely alienating ourselves from our colleagues in other departments? This last point is very important to me as a scholar at a secular institution.

I have a suggestion: I think the Society must be more restrictive about its definition of membership, and the Society should define its activities as an explicitly intellectual, humanistic enterprise.

Concerning membership, we might take a lesson from other Biblical Studies societies in America. The Catholic Biblical Association, the Evangelical Theological Society, and the Institute for Biblical Research are examples that come easily to mind. Active members in the CBA must possess an advanced degree in the field and obtain a current member's recommendation; a committee examines and votes on each application before the applicant is granted membership.<sup>24</sup> The ETS requires its members to possess a Th.M. or higher and requires assent to a statement of faith.<sup>25</sup> The IBR requires applicants to have a doctoral degree along with two letters of support before granting membership.<sup>26</sup> What does the SBL require for full membership? \$65.<sup>27</sup> The problem this

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<sup>24</sup> See <http://cba.cua.edu/becomeamember.cfm>, accessed on November 10, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.etsjets.org/?q=faq>, accessed on November 10, 2007. One might compare the even stricter requirements for admission into the Evangelical Textual Criticism blog (<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/>, accessed on November 11, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> See [http://www.ibr-bbr.org/IBR\\_Membership.aspx](http://www.ibr-bbr.org/IBR_Membership.aspx), accessed on November 10, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> <http://sbl-site.org/JoinSBLToday.aspx>, accessed on November 10, 2007.

creates is most evident, in my experience, at the regional meetings where I have witnessed pastors or, in one case, a woman who had had a visionary experience share their thoughts about the Bible or god or religion. Is the SBL the appropriate venue for this kind of report?

Full membership in the SBL should be restricted to people with an academic doctoral degree from an accredited program. Student membership should be restricted to academic doctoral students. We should make it harder to join instead of easier. Furthermore, given the function of what we study for contemporary religion and the fact the membership in a learned society can give credibility to one's status in the field, it does not seem unreasonable to inform potential applicants for membership about the Society's orientation to academic Biblical Studies. Namely, the application should make it clear that all members of the Society engage the Bible as a product of and influence on human culture. By joining, members implicitly agree in principle to the practice of using the same critical faculties and exercising the same kinds of judgments on the Bible as one might use on, say, an Assyrian royal inscription or a non-canonical gospel. In other words, it should be clear that members of the SBL do not privilege the Bible with a special mode of inquiry.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I am not the only person to call for a clearer statement about what the Society stands for. Note the words of James A. Sanders, former president of SBL:

“How should we address the issue of granting membership and Enlightenment respectability to those who are expected by their institutions to teach non-critical and un-critical theories about the Bible, its origins and development? I would be loathe to have litmus tests of any sort, but would it not be appropriate for the SBL, in terms of its charter, origins, and corporate integrity, to state clearly for all the public to know that we are an enlightenment society sponsoring critical methods of study of the Bible for those who openly subscribe to our mission and to the purposes for which it was founded? All who know me know that I am not one ‘to rock the boat,’ but it does seem to me that a society like ours needs to have clear standards of integrity as a condition of membership” (<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=670>, accessed on November 11, 2007).

What I am proposing may be construed as a litmus test, but given the SBL's origins, as Sanders points out, I think it is merely an explicit affirmation of the core Enlightenment values of the Society.

I am not saying that people in Biblical Studies with a religious commitment are not scholars. That is obviously ridiculous. I am saying, however, that whatever else one might think the Bible is, we can all agree that it is manifestly a human document and therefore that it is most appropriately engaged in a humanistic manner in a learned society like the SBL.

This suggestion does not rid the field of religionism, as Hector wants to do. I do not think that is a legitimate goal for the Society. Nor does it deny a place for religious scholars in Biblical Studies generally. My suggestion will, however, set a more explicit and humanistic standard of expectation for scholars who wish to be affiliated with the SBL and thereby disassociate the members of the Society from a religionist agenda, even if they have one personally. Biblical scholars will then be better situated to fulfill their role in a pluralistic society as knowledge specialists, those best trained to inform and challenge others about biblical literature. I think this is a step in the right direction that even Hector will appreciate.