

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

PRESENT TASKS OF AMERICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP*

JAMES A. MONTGOMERY
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Duty always spells the present task, and the tasks crowd naturally so close upon each other's heels that we do not often enough raise our heads above the routine and take stock of new problems and fresh opportunities.

But upon the whole world the Great War has brought stupendous duties with the compulsion of thinking out grand programs of action never before dreamed of. If in the past four years many of the nations have been compelled to think hard and fast and then turn to the grinding material duty in order to save themselves from a shameful despotism, now a breathing space has come. This might be given to fatigue and repose, but rather it is required for collecting our sadly disturbed minds, boldly prospecting the future, and realizing at least the outlines of its duties and responsibilities.

Yet such a group as this, composed of students of the Bible, might think itself detached from the onward course of the world. If we are personally alive to this detachment and feel at all keenly our place first as citizens of the human polity and not as professional dilettanti, we must be keenly touched by the apparent vanity of much of that in which we have been engaged. As professionals we have been able to contribute nothing to the salvation of the world, and some of us have chafed at the reins, that while almost every other profession has been called on to do its part in the wonderful organization of differentiated functions whereby the war has been won, we, along with similar groups of academics, have been exempted, exempt because we had nothing to give. In the S. A. T. C. courses we have not been wanted, and in the seminaries Hebrew and Greek and Latin have not appealed to men who as ministers of religion felt the war also to be a crusade in which the things of the spirit might be potent as well

* Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature at Columbia University, December 26, 1918.

as the arms of the flesh. With what mind will they come back to their books? At best we can flatter ourselves that as Bible students and teachers we have made some contribution, however impalpable, to the nobler humanity that has fought out this war. Yet the evidence is very indirect. Have we even purposed that object?

There may be those among us whose attitude towards the Great War has been one of impatience over the disturbance to our scholarly ease. We have not been able to correspond with foreign scholarship, to publish, or even to study with repose of mind. Such men may sigh a sigh of relief, and think that now it is all over, they may return to their accustomed tasks, to find them the same and to pick up the broken but still identical thread of their ways. It is such an attitude as this, which in the after-war enervation may affect the most patriotic scholar, that threatens grave danger to Biblical and similar sciences. While indeed their groups have been exempt from the great operations of the world in the past four years, I can see no greater peril lying before our studies and our very professions than the vain imagination that our paradise is to remain unchanged after the War.

We academics flatter ourselves on what we call our pure science, and think we are the heirs of an eternal possession abstracted from the vicissitudes of time. We recall Archimedes working out his mathematical problem under the dagger of the assassin or Goethe studying Chinese during the battle of Jena. But we dare not in this day take comfort in those academic anecdotes nor desire to liken ourselves to the monastic scholars who pursued their studies and meditations in their cells undisturbed by the wars raging without. The world has been unified, it is calling upon all to pool their interests and capitals, and those causes which can show no worth-value, spiritual or material, will no longer be quoted in the world's market. This is particularly true of Bible Knowledge. Despite all skepticism and varieties of religious belief, the world has fostered and propagated Bible study because of its assumed value to humanity. For the science of the Bible—an un-English phrase, by the way—it has little care, as little care as for the mediaeval scholasticism, unless the technical study keeps the interpretation of the Bible up to modern needs as well as standards and vivifies it for the ever-

changing life of society. We might be a polite group of students of the Koran or the Chinese Classics, and, as far as pure science goes, contribute more than can be drawn from the trite study of the Bible, but we may doubt whether our patrons would agree to such demands of science so-called.

Merely as professional students of the Bible—for the majority of the active members of this Society are salaried teachers in colleges and seminaries—we must weigh with some misgivings the present economic status of our case. Dr. John P. Peters has sketched in a recent paper¹ the remarkable development of Biblical and Semitic studies in this country in the past thirty years and exhibited a record of which Americans may well be proud. But the conditions in the latter part of this period are rather ominous. The promise given by Dr. Peters' own Babylonian enterprise of American capacity for great things has not been sustained by American vigor and finance. And at home the shifting of the centre of interest in the seminaries from the Biblical to the sociological studies has severely affected the demand for Biblical scholarship. Hebrew is passing from the seminaries, a *fait accompli* in some of the greatest of them; the exemption from Greek is being vigorously discussed, it is chiefly the conservatism of the Churches that has kept it from being consigned to the scrap heap as a requisite of the minister's education. And this débacle of the philological sciences which lie at the base of Biblical study is but the toppling of the upper story of the whole fabric of the ancient classical education. With Greek and Latin out of the schools, or discounted by popular opinion and arrogant pedagogical theory, it becomes increasingly impossible to raise up a scholarship which is worthy of the Bible. There is even the danger of developing a pseudo-Semitic scholarship which has not the solid substratum of the old education in the humanities, the result of which would be a narrow onesidedness which durst not face the scholarship of the past generations. This falling off in the students fitted in the "Sacred Languages" is already having its effect upon the upper classes of scholarship.

¹In *Thirty Years of Oriental Studies*, issued in commemoration of the thirty years of activity of the Oriental Club of Philadelphia, edited by Dr. R. G. Kent, University of Pennsylvania, 1918. Compare Prof. R. W. Rogers' appended "Discussion" with its pessimistic outlook on the future of Hebrew studies.

Chairs are left unfilled, or when they are to be supplied it is difficult to find the man. I fear that the splendid band of Biblical scholars which dates back to the era of the new Biblical scholarship inaugurated by Dr. Harper, and which has made its mark, despite the limitations circumscribing American scholarship, is not leaving behind an adequate progeny. We have been going on an elder momentum which seems to have spent itself, while adverse forces are further disintegrating our cause.

There is a possibility which may check the present trend of our lower and so higher education. This possibly may come as a consequence of the Great War. The world has not been saved by science, so the man in the street is coming to observe. It was nigh to being ruined by the science of that nation which arrogated all science to itself and which by that token cast down the gage to humanity. At awful cost to the world but more than worth all the blood shed and money spent, has been the pricking of this conceit of science. Not only has the German Terror collapsed, but also—for all modern education has been tarred with the same stick—some of the bubbles of our own conceit have been exploded, more quietly but we may hope with equal effect for good. The world has shaken off its scientific prepossession and has denied on the field of battle that humanity is merely a scientific specimen, to be studied, experimented upon and exploited by professors, diplomats, despots and spies. The supposed cadaver has risen from its bed and smitten a deathblow to its tormentors. And this discovery may lead us back to the recognition of the discarded humanities, back to the notion the ancients had, and even uncivilized races still have, that life is something more than a mechanical unit to be expressed in known terms. The old humanities held this view of man, the Bible and its religions have enforced it, in long periods replacing the classic humanities, and there may be a reaction to those studies, if the thinking men in those departments know how to deflect and guide the tide.

For after all—and I venture to speak of the philosophy of the Bible before a Biblical Society without offence—the Bible stands for just those things for which we and our Allies have fought and triumphed. From the story of the Tower of Babel to the Christ on the White Horse of the New Testament there is the constant challenge to every human thing which would set itself

in the seat of God, be it force or despot or civilization. It has given guidance and inspiration to the souls groping after the Kingdom of God, held before them the ideals of right and peace as indissolubly related, of a natural humanity and a sane democracy, of an idealism always presented in its contrast to the realities, yet ever seeking realization. Its transcendentalism, long unsympathetic to the modern world, finds an awakened echo in the present world of woe. The classicists make similar arguments for their studies, we Biblical students must not fail in presenting our claims. For our very livelihood's sake we must inquire how effectually we are commending our wares and wherein we have erred. For any cause whose champions cannot present it as worth while, must perish.

In this connection I mark that our American Biblical scholarship has been in danger of drawing too hard and fast a line between what we call the scientific and the popular presentation of the Bible. The latter as the line of greatest demand and also of profit has deflected some scholarship from possible first-rate work, while the former duty has been assumed with too much self-consciousness, and hence the proper appeal has not been sufficiently made by the best equipped to even the intelligent public. It cannot be said that we American scholars have shown up as well as those of Great Britain, France and Germany in the production of ripe work, thought out on large lines, based not merely on a technically correct philology but also on a thorough education and humane sympathy. Our scholarship has been too much content to stand apart by itself, leaving what it calls the graces, which rather are as spirit an essential part of the living organism, too much to the popularizer and the preacher. This is a sophomoric attitude which might be corrected if there were in our community a greater mass of well-educated people, or more centres of positive intellectual breeding. But then all the greater reason why in our very democratic and not broadly educated circles the very best and most profoundly educated of our scholarship is needed to present the Bible in a congenial and sympathetic spirit. If it be only a volume of philology and archæology, I doubt if appeal can be made for it, except to small groups. We are in danger of falling into the same educational fallacy which has injured the classical studies, where at the hand of so-called scientific stu-

dents, often just out of college, the classics have been reduced to philological themes. They no longer appeal as humanities, and if we wonder how our forefathers were educated and grew great on those studies, it was not because they were simple-minded; to the contrary, our failure is due to our teaching, to the shifting of the centre of gravity to new but too often minor centres of gravity. Philology, criticism, history of religion, are necessary introductions to the study of the Bible and independent as its by-products, but can never replace the higher introduction, that by which the teacher leads his student *con amore* into the spirit and charm of the Bible. Mere flippancy of treatment of the greater issues of the Bible, a sorry kind of stage effect, has its own reward; the world takes such a scholar at his quip and leaves him and his subject severely alone.

In regard to Biblical criticism our American scholarship is itself to be criticized for remaining too long by the old baggage. It has often been said that British and American scholarship lags a generation behind that of Germany, and I believe that the reproach is true in comparison with Europe in regard to the advanced steps we need to take beyond the critical elements. These are not the *ne plus ultra*. It can hardly be said of us that we have contributed much to the reconstruction of the Biblical history and life. On the historical side our scholarship has been meagre. We have carried on, often parrotwise, our analyses, but when we come to the reconstruction of the original picture, where the criticism should go into the footnotes, we have fallen short. American archaeology has indeed made important and striking historical contributions, this often without reck of criticism or even in defiance of it. But we have not been pliable enough to change the habit of mind from that of analysis to that of synthesis. Whether we are too much under the spell of our schoolboy masters, whether our mind fatigues and runs out early, whether we are afraid of results which will offend whether the radical or conservative, I know not. Here again we have to reckon with our patrons who employ us for their guides and teachers. They are not interested in the laboratory methods which so engross us, absolutely essential as these are. But they do, and rightly, inquire of us the products we have gained. If you have taken away our old views of the Bible, they ask, and these were faiths, what fresh organism of flesh and blood can you

recreate for the history which we fondly imagined once beat under these fragments? The world does not care for the Bible as a pursuit of the ingenious mind, but it wants to be assured whether it once fitted into the web and warp of human history and still has something to say to human life. If we cannot prove that, the day of the Bible is over, at least its teaching will pass into other hands and conditions.

To this I venture to add a word on the religious valuation of the Bible. We have essayed to treat it as philology, as archaeology, as history, as literature, and as many new and fascinating phases of study have developed. But the Bible remains primarily a religious book, and the student must approach it with religious sympathy. As it is absurd to think of a student of art approaching his subject without the aesthetic sense, so it is equally absurd for the student of the Bible to handle it without some reaction upon his religious sensibilities. There is the danger of the scientific fetish of mind deadening this sensibility, as if the student of Greek art should think he has accomplished his task when he has minutely and painfully measured an Attic vase, while in spirit he falls infinitely behind the untutored soul that is ravished by its beauty. The mere measurements of the Bible must not deter us from the appreciation of it as that which it claims to be, a book of religion. And none can fully interpret it who is not possessed by that prepossession. Not the childish fear of the appearance of faith or confessionism should keep us from this full approach to the Bible. It is after all, on the whole, those who have believed in it who have been its greatest interpreters. And the duty lies upon us Biblical scholars to show the world that we believe in its worth and assert its value with an enthusiasm that is tinged by emotion as well as moderated by reason.

Such are some of the internal conditions of our American Biblical scholarship and the criticism that may be applied to it in the present circumstances. But there is also a foreign relationship to whose bearings upon our subject we cannot shut our eyes. Germany has been our mistress in Biblical scholarship, we have gone to school to her, her textbooks have been ours. Now the moral ties binding us with her have been broken, and with that has snapped the intellectual relationship. If it were otherwise, we were pedants, not men, no better than mummies.

We can no longer go to school to a nation against which we feel a moral revulsion. It is not for us a question of politics, whereby we might try to distinguish between the military class and the so-called people. But the Intellectuals of Germany, including the men of our science, sided unanimously and with brazen effrontery with the despotism, through its scientific relations with us tried to pull the wool over our eyes, have misinterpreted facts and history, the realm in which they were professed masters. It is not a question of forgiving but of forgetting. It will take a long time before our natural psychology can again go to school to Germany. As a prominent member of this Society wrote me in 1914, when I was in Jerusalem, "we can no longer accept an ethics made in Germany." And this revulsion must apply also to philosophy and theology and historical science. The men who prostituted their science to the Terror, even deceiving some among us, cannot easily be taken as guides even in pure science. The past is a closed chapter, to be slowly opened and continued by the long hand of time.

We have hardly yet realized the results of this catastrophe, but it has vast implications for us. To begin with, the very social and educational relations are broken. There is a popular hatred of Germany which will condemn for long all things bearing its hallmark. The break in the teaching of German in our schools will have its material effect upon the study of German theology. For this taboo on a glorious language the possessors have themselves to blame.

A break in long and cherished political and academic associations such as we have experienced is a sad disaster. Many of us feel it deeply, because personally. For compensations there are the opportunities offered by the closer academic ties now presenting themselves with Great Britain and France. Negotiations have already been entered into between the American Oriental Society and the Société Asiatique, looking forward to mutual coöperation among the learned societies of the Allies.² We have still much to learn from those countries, which are racially, politically and intellectually our nearest neighbors, bound to us now by a brotherhood knit in blood, and a change of schooling may bring its compensations. But more than these

² For these negotiations see the current part of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1918, p. 310.

fresh attachments, the opportunity has come for American scholarship to assert its independence and to attempt to work out its equality with that of other nations of the earth. In this competition we have hitherto been, like the Greek before the Egyptian priest, a little too modest, if not as to our deserts at least as to our capabilities. We have no reason to be ashamed of what has been done in certain monumental ways, from Edward Robinson down. We can claim as particularly our own the Great English dictionaries of the two Testaments, ours is in large part the International Commentary, ours the undertaking of the Polychrome Bible. It is impossible to give even a summary view of the work done by individual scholars, much of it of a calibre equal to any done abroad.³

Yet there are many deficiencies in our learned encyclopaedia, to which we have resigned ourselves, but which the new spirit of our independence must make us keenly alive to. Before the War the writer felt it was unnecessary for us to attempt to reduplicate the excellent elementary works so cheaply procurable in German; the student should be required to learn the language. But now I am coming to hold that we should make ourselves self-sufficient in all essential literature. This ought to be deemed an integral part of the training of our scholarship that it be required to produce the necessary apparatus. We have at present, for instance, to go to Germany for our elementary textbooks in Biblical Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic. We have no adequate Hebrew grammar or dictionary for school use. We have not supplied ourselves with anything like the Short Commentaries of the German scholars. As scholars we ourselves have not felt the need, but it is to be expected that if the popular interest is to be maintained and a native substratum of learning is to be accumulated, we must develop a Biblical literature of our own make. Cosmopolitanism in science is a fair ideal for the upper strata, but it must be based upon deep-rooted national foundations. There are stirrings of this sense among us, provoked by the War, and we may hail the program of an *Opus* of Semitic Inscriptions which has been planned by our colleague Professor Clay. And as an asset to our American scholarship we must mark with great interest the establishment of the new

³ See the paper by Peters cited above and the accompanying paper by Jastrow in the same volume.

Jewish Learning in our country. America may become the new home of Rabbinic studies; we shall watch with expectation for the enrichment that should come from this foundation to all our Biblical study.

The scholarly lack in our output is conditioned by the mechanical and economical lack of proper printing facilities in this country. This fact may be focussed by recalling that up to the time of the Great War our own Journal and that of the Oriental Society had been printed for a few years in Germany. This business has come back to our shores, never I hope to return abroad. But the high rates of American printing have gone up steadily in the past four years. The *Jewish Quarterly Review*, now American, is still printed in England. The printing of scholarly books on this side of the Atlantic faces the tremendously high cost of bookmaking, which is aggravated by the lack of a sufficient corps of trained typesetters when it comes to the matter of Oriental types. Again, when such books are published they do not find the local demand to warrant them as in the more intensely educated lands of Europe.

Further there is no national support for our kind of literature and its auxiliaries, and while individual academics and museums have munificently published scientific series, the means for these have been generally supplied by private contributions, in many cases painfully secured through the solicitation of the indefatigable scholars concerned. Our School in Jerusalem has suffered because it has never possessed the means to publish its memoirs, and so has nothing to show comparable with the learned and popular publications and journals of the European schools. It is an eternal credit to President Harper that he demanded that the Press should be part of his University.

This tremendous drawback must be recognized in the first place by us scholars, and the duty lies upon us of forming initial resolutions to abate the evil. We might, for instance, following the trades-union-like rules of certain practical professions, insist that gifts, endowments, academic extensions, should always provide for proper publication, and rather refuse them if their purposes are really to be made useless, if there is to be the process of gestation but no bringing to birth. We might collectively bring pressure to bear upon our schools to induce their patrons to recognize this need, as also upon the large funds that are

being given to the cause of education in this country, but which ignore the humanities. The layman fails not in generosity but in imagination, and this it is our professional duty to stimulate. It is a pleasure in this connection to refer to a movement undertaken by our fellow member, President Cyrus Adler, looking towards an endowed Hebrew Press.

One particular desideratum in our literature may be noticed: a current Biblical Bibliography and Review. This want has been supplied to us from Germany, and the necessity of our own operation in that line has been brought home to us by the famine of the past four years. Our journals have not the means to supply this need, at least apparently so, or else they have not duly weighed the matter, and we have been thrown upon the mercies of the national weeklies and dailies or ecclesiastical journals for the learned reviews of learned books. The result is that in general the art of such reviewing has become a lost art in this country. The art may not make an appeal to many minds, but all agree that if it is practised at all it should be of the same calibre as the objects of criticism. Either such a Review for Biblical or general Semitic lines (but the latter would squeeze out the New Testament) should be financed as a separate venture, or to avoid the expense of a new undertaking, the present existing journals should be enabled to supply the need. It might be that this task could be simplified by parcelling the work out among the journals related to our cause, of which we have a highly meritorious list: those of our Society and the Oriental Society, the *Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, the *Harvard Theological Review*. In our present poverty some form of syndicalism may be necessary.

Our American scholarship has taken its part in the duty of Biblical criticism, in some cases notably, but it may be asked whether this labor has not become too much an ingrowing process, tending to deaden spirit and petrify work. None can pore too long over the same material without losing the long sight and wide prospect. What we need is fresh raw material. In this Europe has the advantage over us.

In the first place I would refer to the absence in this country of the materials of the Lower Criticism, the manuscripts. What American scholarship can effect in this line is demonstrated by

the admirable work done by our own men, where chance has brought the original documents to our shores; I think particularly of the publication of the Freer manuscripts, done by a classicist whom we gladly welcome as also a Biblical scholar. But in general the absence of the visible, tangible material, at hand in a nearby museum, has impoverished our scholarship. We have a secondhand knowledge of the sigilla representing the Greek manuscripts; a comprehension of a group of manuscripts like the nebulous Lucianic family, is in general void. It puts us in good society to name these things, but our talk is often jargon. Now this stuff is in Europe, we cannot loot it like the treatment of the Belgian churches and museums. And future finds will naturally remain in Europe or gravitate thither. There is, however, one practical thing we can do, which would enable us almost to see and touch those precious things themselves, stimulate our direct knowledge of the sources of text criticism, and give us material for original work. I refer to the procuring of copies by the photostat process of all important Biblical manuscripts, the so neglected cursives, etc. This is a work that might be undertaken through common understanding and coöperation by our academic and general libraries, with a distribution of the material through the country. I would suggest that the Library of Congress is the proper institution to lead in this work, and I believe it would be worth while to present the matter to the authorities of that Library. In the past years of war we have been made painfully alive to the destruction which barbarians can still work in the world's literary treasures, and it is the duty of booklovers to secure the permanence of the world's treasures by procuring and distributing their facsimiles. For the Bible this Society should take the initiative.

But there is another field of raw material, lying still in its original beds of deposit, for which we can compete with the Europeans on equal, or even, considering our vigor and financial ability, on superior terms. I mean the raw stuff of archaeology. When we look back upon the history of American Biblical scholarship we see, if none else, Edward Robinson, who gave a glory to our name which none will ever dispute. As a great philologist, such as he was, his name would endure only as one of many in the course of learned bookmaking. No Higher Critic, but a devoted adherent to the canonical text of the Bible, and

impatient of all which conflicted with it, he might have soon been dismissed from memory as antiquated. But he had the inspired idea of taking scholarship back to the home of the Bible, and opened to the world a new book, even though we have been remiss in perusing it through to the end.

In the eighties one of our own number, still hale and active among us, conceived the expedition to Nippur and put the undertaking through undaunted. Its results are not strictly Biblical, and yet his finds, as the quarry of our American Assyriology and the school of a band of scholars whose names are known worldwide, have directly enriched the philology of the Bible. One other American has followed in the footsteps of Robinson, Dr. Frederick J. Bliss. The great experiment at Nippur has not been duplicated, although it has had a worthy successor in the Harvard Expedition to Samaria, the results of which unfortunately still remain unpublished. It is the labors of the past alone to which we can point with peculiar pride. If first we took the leadership, our competitors have outstripped us. Yet America has the capacity, the means for still greater things.

This or that large-minded institution, this or that beneficent patron, may be induced to revive such works. But I would remind you of an institution which, as a child of this Society, founded by its revered onetime President, Dr. Thayer, has a special claim upon us. I refer to the School in Jerusalem. Its work must primarily appeal to Biblical scholarship, its support must principally be drawn from those who love and care for the Bible. Its results have been outwardly small. But its possibilities of enrichment to our scholarship have been experienced and in some cases notably demonstrated by the scholars who have gone to school at Jerusalem. An enlarged field of activity lies before it now. May I commend it to your corporate as well as individual interest? In this day of unrest and stimulated energy such a field of archaeology may attract men of practical ability and exploring genius, and so save for us a type of student whom booklearning cannot satisfy.

Duty implies action on the part of men and human organizations, its spirit must have a body. The duties of American Biblical scholarship must be realized by us individuals, or in the mass by some corporation composed of us. This Society meets annually, a sympathetic group of students, feeling more

than rewarded by contact with like-minded men. We are known to the world through our scholarly Journal. But might we not do more as a corporate body, following the example of some of our European sisters? Instead of resigning ourselves to our hard conditions, complaining of the American world's neglect, might not the organism of this Society be made to work more efficiently and concretely towards the aims of our quest? None can attain these by himself alone, but only through the union in which is strength. And for what purpose else exists the union?