# ONE SMALL STEP FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES... THE GROWTH OF THE SA BIBLICAL STUDIES SOCIETY

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#### **Abstract**

The subject Biblical Studies was introduced as a school subject during the early 1960's. Accordingly, it was also introduced as a subject for teachers at universities. In the early days it could hardly be called an independent subject. In most cases it was taught as a part-time responsibility by lecturers in theology and/or ministers of religion. Slowly this situation changed and especially during the late 1960's independent departments of Biblical Studies came to be. Subsequently the need arose among lecturers of the subject to create a forum where matters of mutual interest could be discussed.

#### 1. Prelude

During the 1970's various attempts were made to create such a forum. However, these attempts were no successful, especially due to the diverse opinions of those present (Vosloo 1988).

On 9 May 1981 a Biblical Studies congress was initiated by the University of Pretoria. About 50 persons, representing 11 Universities, 4 colleges of education, 3 Departments of Education and two churches attended.

The aim of the congress was (translated): 'to give attention to certain issues in the presentation of Biblical Studies at universities, colleges and schools, and to try and solve these issues in co-operation with all parties concerned '(Lategan 1981:18). In his opening lecture the congress chairman pointed out the following problems that should receive urgent and concerted attention: the decline in students enrolling for Biblical Studies at many universities; the reasons for the small numbers of pupils enrolling for Biblical Studies at [white] schools and the declining number of [white] schools that offer the subject at matric level; the syllabi at school, colleges and universities; and the possibility of accommodating students other than those intent on teaching (Vosloo 1982).

The congress appointed a Continuation Committee, consisting of: Prof W Vosloo (UP) convenor, the late proff NSL Fryer (UZ), PJ du Plessis (RAU), drr M Coetzer (Pta Onderwyskollege) and W van Wyk (Dept E & T). Various resolutions were adopted with regard to university requirements and syllabi at school, colleges and universities. The Continuation Committee was instructed to deal with these matters and to report back at a follow-up congress.

Prof Lategan (1981:21-22) summarized the results of the congress as follows: There are a number of problems to be attended to; co-operation among the different universities and other parties concerned is possible; a permanent secretariate and a task group is necessary to take up these matters. The necessity that there should be more co-operation among universities, colleges and education departments in black and white education was accentuated.

After having studied the resolutions of the 1981 congress, the Continuation Committee called on 10 universities and other institutions to do research on specific topics and prepare papers to be read at the following congress. A draft constitution was also prepared.

# 2. The birth of a new academic society

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The founding occasion was the congress held at RAU on 16 April 1982. During the Business Meeting (Notule Besigheidsvergadering 1982:1, 4) it was decided to form a Biblical Studies Society. The draft constitution was discussed, amended and adopted. (For the precise text, cf 'Konstitusie' 1982.) The name would be the *Southern African Society for the promotion of Biblical Studies*. The Continuation Committee was commissioned to function as an Executive Committee until the next Congress. Prof W Vosloo (UP) was elected as General Secretary and chairman of the EC, and the late Prof NSL Fryer (UZ) as assistant secretary. Other members were: Dr W van Wyk (Dept of Educ & Training) as Treasurer, the late Prof PJ du Plessis (RAU) and Dr MJG Coetzer (Pretoria Onderwyskollege).

This inauguration was a small beginning in more than one aspect. The founder members of the new Society totalled 39 and by 8 October 1982 the treasurer reported that the *huge* sum of R143,81 was at the disposal of the Society! The papers read and the discussions that followed evolved around the profession, namely practical problems, syllabi and other administrative matters. This becomes apparent in the most important decisions made by the congress (*Besluite* 1982):

- to advise members not to include Greek and Hebrew as part of the undergraduate Biblical Studies course;
- to commission the Executive Committee to prepare a core syllabus for Biblical Studies at universities;
- to advise members to steer clear of any controversial dogma;
- to give specific instructions to the Executive Committee with regard to the problems concerning Biblical Studies at school level;
- to ask the Education Departments to consider offering Biblical Studies from standard 6;
- to present the results of the research of the RAU with regard to Religious Education
  at school to the different departments of education with the request to appoint an
  official commission of inquiry in this regard;
- that Religious Education at school should as far as possible be taught by teachers with Biblical Studies as part of their training;
- to urge departments of education to place Biblical Studies in a more favourable position to enable pupils to choose it as a matriculation subject.

The focus on professional problems should be understood against the backdrop of the past. In previous years academical discussions on the subject itself lead to (sometimes major) disputes. This was an attempt to create a better mutual understanding by concentrating on those matters about which there was common agreement, namely problems in the profession. A problem which proved to be very important, was the issue raised in the paper prepared by RAU and read by the late Prof PJ du Plessis. It contained the results of research concerning Religious Education at school and exposed various deficiencies in the system. This gave rise to intensive country-wide discussions

on the matter. It was published in various newspapers and caused a flutter in the dove cote. It certainly placed the Society on the map as an institution to be taken account of.

The next congress in 1983 was still dominated by problems with regard to the profession and administrative matters such as the revision of the constitution. A core syllabus for universities was tabled, altered and adopted (for the full text, cf 'Kernleerplan' 1983:44-55). It was by no means rigid and left room for variations according to local needs. The intention was that this core syllabus would 'pave the way towards a more uniform approach by South African Universities' ('Core syllabus' 1983:74). It surely was an important contribution towards the improvement of the general situation of the subject.

#### 3. Professional issues

It has already been pointed out that from its inception the Society took up the role of watch-dog over the interests of Biblical Studies. The disclosure of irregularities in the teaching of Religious Education at some schools in 1982 was only the beginning of a critical evaluation of the position of Biblical Studies and Religious Education at school level. Likewise the adoption of a core syllabus for universities in 1983 was the beginning of many attempts at improving internal standards. The Society therefore dealt with external as well as internal professional issues.

### 3.1 External issues: School syllabi

The problems concerning Religious Education and Biblical Studies at schools were taken up with various departments of education. It was soon realist that the core of all the problems was the outdated and one-sided curricula in use at schools. This aspect became the main issue which the Society took up with the authorities and laboured at unceasingly during the 14 years under review.

# 3.1.1 The first attempt via the Research Committee, OFS Department of Education

Following discussions with the authorities, the Society was invited in 1984 to partake in the replanning of syllabi for Biblical Studies at school via the Research Committee for Biblical Studies of the Department of Education, OFS. After consultation with a number of universities and further contributions and adaptations by the Society's Committee for Curriculum Design, a report was prepared and presented to the Research Committee in Bloemfontein.

A very fruitful discussion between the General Secretary and the Research Committee contained promises of important changes and it seemed as if the Society was able to contribute towards replanning of syllabi. However, within a year it became known that it was decided to implement a new education policy which included the modulation of syllabi. At the Annual General Meeting in 1987 it was reported:

Discussions concerning alterations to the present school syllabi of Biblical Studies have come to a temporary standstill due to the process of change in the educational structures (*Report* 1987:4).

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# 3.1.2 The second attempt by co-operation with the Interdepartmental Curriculum Committee

By 1988 the Society once more took up the matter with the authorities and offered our assistance. Various discussions with the appropriate committees followed and the Society made important contributions towards developing new syllabi. By 1989 the Executive Committee could report as follows:

After many years of hard work, the possibility of new syllabi for Biblical Studies at schools are within sight. The EC and some of our members were allowed to make a considerable contribution to the development of the new syllabi. We are most thankful that we were granted this opportunity to co-operate with the Interdepartmental Curriculum Committee of the Departments of Education in this regard. The draft syllabi have now been translated and will be forwarded to all parties concerned for critique, whereafter they will be finalised. The EC is very pleased with the new proposed syllabi and do wish that they will be accepted by all concerned even though there might be minor differences... (Report 1989:3).

While it was reported at the 1990 Annual General Meeting that the syllabi were finalized by the Departmental Curriculum Committee, they still had to pass through a number of channels before they could be put into practice. However, the landslide event of 2 February 1990 soon affected this matter too. It became clear that a totally new vision of education, including religious education at school was at hand. Once more the end of the school syllabus road evaded the Society.

# 3.1.3 The third attempt: The Framework Committee

In the beginning of 1991 the Executive Committee obtained a document submitted by the Department of National Education at a seminar of the Framework Committees on 25 and 26 February 1991 (cf *Minutes* 1991:4-8). The committees were required to study and offer comments on the document with a view to the formulation of a new education policy. However, the proposals were not at all acceptable to the Society. Consequently the Executive prepared an extensive memorandum in this connection, including alternative proposals, and presented it to the Minister of National Education. This was received very favourably by the Minister, who gave the assurance that a new dispensation would have room for Biblical Studies and Biblical education. Furthermore, the Society was invited to take part in a discussion in the office of the Director General of National Education. At this occasion the Society was able to explain its proposals for a new dispensation. It turned out to be a most satisfactory discussion.

In the report of the Chairman of the Society on this matter it was emphasized that the Society will have to view the matter in all earnest in two ways:

Firstly, we will have to get our own house in order by developing our subject to such an extent that it becomes an indispensable component of the preparation of the pupil and student by placing new emphasis on ethical matters and the relevance of the Bible for the person and problems of our day.

Secondly, we will have to resist all attempts from outside to make our subject irrelevant, yet be prepared to offer our fullest co-operation in attempts to negotiate a meaningful place and function for our subject in a changing South Africa. (Report 1991:7)

#### 3.1.4 The fourth attempt: The Core Syllabus Committee: Life Orientation

In the meanwhile it became clear that the Society should clearly formulate its own policy on religious education at school. A document styled 'Religious Education and its place in the new educational system' was prepared and endorsed by the Annual General Meeting. This policy was presented to various decision makers.

At the 1992 congress the Society decided to appoint an ad hoc committee to work on definite proposals for a new Biblical Studies curriculum. The ad-hoc committee on Syllabus Proposals prepared a further two drafts of proposed syllabi. These documents, plus the other memoranda which the Society had prepared during 1991-1993, were submitted to the Sub Committee for Religious Education of the Core Syllabus Committee: Life Orientation of the Department of National Education. These proposals were accommodated in a 'Discussion Document' which was submitted to the sub committee on Curriculum Development of the NETF.

Besides some minor points of criticism, the document was referred back for further development. It was also referred to the Society's ad-hoc committee on Syllabus Proposals for criticism and further comments. It seems that this document will form the basis of the new syllabi in the coming dispensation. To have been co-instrumental in the creation of new sallybi for schools, is an achievement which was envisaged at the inception of the Society. This goal, namely new acceptable syllabi, was the object of much toil and labour for many years. Of course, even if these proposals are accepted, the detail of the syllabi will still have to be worked out. I sincerely hope that our Society will also be able to make significant contributions to this secondary stage of development.

#### 3.2 Internal issues

A number of internal matters received the attention of the Society. The following matters were reported: The constitution was updated from time to time. The name of the Society was changed to *The Southern African Biblical Studies Society* and the designations of some of the office-bearers were changed. It was decided to allow persons who do not qualify for full membership as associate members. The possibility of a degree in Biblical Studies was investigated, but found to be not feasible. An investigation was made with regard to the use and possible updating of the core syllabus for universities. The following deserves to be described in more detail:

#### 3.2.1 Scriptura

A certain sign of growth and matureness was the agreement reached with the editor of *Scriptura* to annually publish a special edition fully devoted to and edited by the Society. The first editorial panel was Dr PJ Hartin, editor (Wits), Prof WJ van Huyssteen (UPE) and Prof PM Venter (UP). It was decided that 'The main scope of the articles to be taken up in this publication should be the achievement of Biblical Studies, Bible Education and Religious Studies at tertiary level by focussing attention on method, content, etc' (*Report* 1987:3). Papers read at the annual congress, like any other contribution, would also be considered for publishing after having been approved by at least two referees. The first of these editions appeared in 1988 (*Scriptura* vol 26, July 1988).

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#### 3.2.2 Work Groups

Another first was the creating of three Work Groups, namely for Biblical Science, Education and Contextualization. The purpose was to create the opportunity for those who are interested in specific aspects of Biblical Studies, to do research on relevant topics, to evaluate preliminary papers, and to serve as a forum to discuss matters of mutual interest to those members.

#### 3.2.3 A Definition of Biblical Studies

The question as to what the subject 'Biblical Studies' should comprise had led to much difference of opinion in the past. The document presented to the Research Committee in Bloemfontein in 1984, contained a definition of Biblical Studies. Translated and abbreviated, it boils down to the following (*Verslag* 1984:3):

Biblical Studies is the academic study of the Bible, but is not concerned with the effect of the Bible in history or the reflection on the Bible through the ages. It is concerned with the logical analysis of the Bible which influences the presuppositions of the student in a critical way. Thus the scientific study of the Bible plays a dialogical-corrective role with regard to the presuppositions of the student. This leads to the cultivation of value systems and attitudes of a less dogmatic and more Biblical character.

According to the same report Biblical Studies has a well defined purpose. In translated form it reads (*Verslag* 1984:4):

The purpose of Biblical Studies is therefore to enable pupils and students to understand and use the Bible in a more controlled manner. In order to attain this goal the pupil/student should, besides a knowledge of the contents of the Bible as a book of the church, be thoroughly versed in the structure, formation, background, literary forms, goal and relevance of the component parts, as well as the whole of the Bible.

It is quite clear that this definition and purpose cannot be accepted any more and needs to be reformulated in terms of changed demands and circumstances and according to the Society's newly adopted policy on Biblical Studies.

# 4. The different stages of academic growth

The academic growth evolved in four stages which can be described as the Consolidation Stage (focus on professional problems, 1981-1983), the Comprehension Stage (attention to matters concerning Biblical Science, 1984-1986), the Education Stage (1987-1989) and the Contextualization Stage (1990-1994). As it was, these four stages became the four fields of the activities of the Society.

# 4.1 The Consolidation Stage

The Consolidation Stage is marked by an emphasis on external problems, namely those encountered in the profession. This drive towards consolidation is apparent in the congress papers of 1981, 1982 and 1983, which have been discussed above. As pointed out, there was a definitive planning to concentrate on mutual problems in order to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. The fact that this consolidation was attained within three years, reveals something of the rapid growth of this young society.

It became clear that the time was ripe for a change in this paradigm. Consequently it was decided that, in contrast to the papers read at the congress, discussions on professional matters were to be shifted to the Annual General Meeting. The Executive Committee became the instrument which handled these practical matters and reported back to the Annual General Meeting. This marks a course that was to be followed in the years to come. The Society therefore clearly has two main objectives: Besides the professional one which has already been discussed, there is also the academic purpose. This latter one is more apparent during the second, third and fourth stages of development.

## 4.2 The Comprehension Stage

The congresses of 1984, 1985 and 1986 were featured by attempts to clear up old differences. The papers read at the 1984 congress hosted by the University of Pretoria, really came to grips with academical issues and reflect the first specific move towards discussing internal problems which were of an academic nature. The issues at stake were, inter alia: What exactly is *Biblical Studies*, some form of *Old* and *New Testament* only, or does it include a splatter of other theological subjects? What hermeneutical approach should be followed in the interpretation of biblical texts? What educational philosophy was to be employed when teaching the subject? What is the difference between what is taught at school and what is taught by the churches?

Under the main theme styled An evaluation of Biblical Studies (cf Scriptura 13, 1984) the question as to what Biblical Studies is or should be received the major emphasis. Clarity on this very important issue which led to so much controversy in the past, was a prerequisite for fruitful further academic discussions about Biblical Studies. Various views on the matter had to be voiced, positions evaluated, accepted or at least understood. After having dealt with mutual problems for three years members were ripe to tackle this stone of scone of the past. This time differences were discussed in a very responsible way. Furthermore, for the first time a non-white member was invited to read a paper, a paper in which he accentuated that Biblical Studies has an important function in a society full of divisions, discrimination, distrust and hatred (Goliath 1984:34). Indeed, this congress marks a coming of age for the young society in more than one way.

The 1985 congress in Bloemfontein took a further step in the direction of clearing the air among members with diverse opinions by staging a debate about fundamentalism and the historical critical approach under the theme *Perspectives on Biblical Studies and Biblical exegesis*. This theme was chosen in order to create a forum where this issue which had led to various disputes among members could be discussed in a responsible way. Although the discussions on the first two topics were sometimes heated, the mere fact that these issues were discussed in an academic way, led to better mutual understanding.

In the meanwhile another problem cropped up. The academic papers led to other differences among members. Not only differences in Biblical interpretation came to the fore, but also members' expectations with regard to the annual congress. It seemed as though some members preferred more academical papers and discussions, while others wanted the congress to concentrate on practical matters. These differences accentuate the necessity of a society like this where colleagues could get together and build more mutual understanding and patience. However, the fine disposition among members

despite their differences formed a good platform towards fruitful inter-action and good cooperation.

The general theme for the 1986 congress was *The Bible and faith* as a practical sequel to the hermeneutical point of departure of the previous year. The two methods (historical critical approach and historico-grammatical approach) were demonstrated by way of texts taken from the two testaments. It became very clear that quite a number of the members were not versed in the practical implications of these two methods and that this had led to considerable misunderstanding. However, it also became clear that the last word on this topic was still to be uttered.

# 4.3 The Education Stage

The congress of 1987 at Vista University marked another emphasis, namely special attention to the educational aspect of Biblical Studies. The theme was Biblical Studies for a new era: Focus on schools. This was followed by the 1988 congress at the University of Pretoria under the theme Biblical Studies: Education and praxis. The purpose of the congress was to provide a 'solid methodological investigation for the study of the field of Biblical Studies' (Hartin 1989). Therefore it was decided to obtain experts in their own fields of methodology in order to learn from them. Specialists in the fields of communication, psychology, education and computer based education were invited to read papers. A further development was to invite members to read short papers of their own choice in order to stimulate research.

The congress 'was judged to be highly successful... above all the unity of theme helped to bind the whole congress together and it gave a direction to the entire proceedings. The papers were also judged to be of a high standard. It was felt that not all the short papers were so successful. This was something new this year and it... must be given a chance to develop. The great advantage was that it gave an opening to more people to contribute papers...' (Minutes 1988:4).

The 1989 congress at JCE similarly gave attention to educational matters. The theme was The Bible, the child and education and included papers such as: Biblical Studies for Bible Instruction, The child and religion en route to adulthood, Biblical Studies: What and whence? and Creative thinking in religion.

# 4.4 The Contextualization Stage

This period was ushered in by the 1990 congress at RAU by dealing with *The actuality of the Bible in a new South Africa*. The editorial preface of the edition of *Scriptura* in which some of these papers were published, evaluates the congress as follows:

The context of the conference was that of widespread optimism and even a certain euphoria. Recent events in South Africa with the unbanning of the ANC, the PAC and the SACP on February 2 1990, as well as the subsequent release of Nelson Mandela had given rise to the sincere hope that something new was soon to emerge from the ashes of *apartheid*-South Africa (Hartin 1991).

With these words an important feature of the SA Biblical Studies Society was highlighted, namely not to stand aloof of the burning problems of the day, but to contribute towards solving the problems by striving to emphasize the relevance of the Bible for 20th century South Africa. In the words of the editor:

This is no ivory discussion, but one that effects the lives of all who consider the Bible important for life and faith.

In this way the SA Bibical Studies Society was giving attention to relevant issues which were not being addressed by other societies.

At the 1991 congress at Unisa this road was explored even further under the general theme Values and education for a new generation. On evaluating the congress, the Executive Committee came to the conclusion that 'people were able to express their thoughts in a free and uninhibited way. One was particularly grateful for the spirit that pervaded the congress. It was felt that our Society was far more practical than many other societies of a similar nature. There was a marked increase in the constituency of our Society whereby it is truly representative of our Society as such. This shows that the members demonstrate that there is a real relevance for our Society' (Minutes of the Executive Committee 1991:3-4).

At the 1992 congress hosted by Vista University, the theme, The Bible, theology and our context, created the opportunity to discuss the contextualization of Biblical Studies in particular. The following main papers were read: Reading the Bible in our context: Problems involved, Toward a local Zionist theology? The role of the outsider theologian and Towards a solution. With these papers as introduction, members came to grips with important issues of the day. At the end of the third main paper it was decided to appoint an ad-hoc committee with Prof JC Malan as convenor to work on a curriculum for Biblical Studies to enable the Society to make a contribution to new curricula and syllabi in the future dispensation.

Even the 1993 congress at the University of the Witwatersrand followed this direction, for although the theme was Old and new in teaching the Bible, the attention was directed to a different type of contextualization, namely that of the adults, teenagers and little children. However, the 1994 congress at Pretoria once more focused attention on a changing South African society. The theme, Biblical values and contemporary South African society, and the main papers The social sciences and the interpretation of the Bible, The Bible and justice: Legislating for justice and The Bible and women: A Black feminist hermeneutic, is a fitting culmination of the period of Contextualization in a year of such dramatic changes in our country. At the same time it is a fitting climax for the end of the 14 year period of being an academic society that intends to cultivate a Biblical theology that is not removed from the weal and woe of persons for whom it was intended.

#### 5. Conclusion

Within the brief period of 14 years the SA Biblical Studies Society has grown from a humble beginning to a academical society of stature. The financial reserves have increased from a mere R143,81 to more than R 18 000,00. The 39 members have grown to more than 120, including men and women of all races, various languages, different denominations, representing almost all universities in Southern Africa, many colleges and departments of education.

It is a vibrant society that takes the lead in demonstrating the relevance of the Bible with regard to the burning issues of the day. It acts as a watch-dog with regard to religious education in its various forms in schools and tertiary institutions. It functions as a forum where the latest academical matters with regard to our subject from the viewpoint of Old and New Testament, Systematic Theology, Science of Religion,

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Education and other related subjects are discussed, whereby it has become the only theological forum of such a diversity.

Looking back, one can say with confidence that the Society surely has fulfilled its purpose and certainly has an important role to play in the future.

Looking at the future, the Society still has a responsibility and a decisive function with regard to professional matters on behalf of our members. The contents of Biblical Studies has already shifted from the outdated strict Old and New Testament studies, splashed with a little bit of Systematic Theology, to a contents that is more market related. Biblical Studies will have to move away from training teachers, to teaching the trainable. It's function will have to change to making the Bible relevant to the person in the street, the office, the factory, the classroom, the playground. This shift will call for a different approach in the way we teach the Bible.

Besides the basic biblical knowledge, Biblical Studies will have to explain the phenomenon of religion, other religions in the country, the relationship between the Bible and everyday life, the ethical applications of the Bible, and the inter-action between religion and sosio-economical conditions, religion and political structures, religion and art in all its varieties. Of course this might call for a change of name such as 'Biblical and Religious Studies', but I am convinced that it would be all worth the while. Students of the subject will have to be taught how to be critical without being unbelievers, to appreciate the rational in religion without denying room for the irrational, to love the own religion without disrespect for that of the other person.

This approach will certainly lead to a revival in the subject, drawing students from over the whole spectrum of departments in a university. The shift will have to be away from trying to prove the importance of the subject, towards the demonstration of it's indispensability as a way to restore balance in modern lives bent on technology. The emphasis will have to be away from an overburdening of facts, towards a culturing of biblical values and norms.

Of course one could ask: What could be the next stage in our research and discussions? I am of opinion that, as in the past, this will be determined by prevailing circumstances. However, I find it hard not to believe that it will have to be in the direction of reconstruction, reconciliation and affirmative action. But whatever it may be, I am confident of a bright future for Biblical Studies and the Southern African Biblical Studies Society.

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