

## THE 1980 CENTENNIAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE : A CENTURY OF AMERICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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The festive atmosphere surrounding the 1980 Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Dallas from 5 - 9 November, was not without good reason. The occasion marked the centennial of a Society which grew from inauspicious beginnings to become a dominant force in American biblical scholarship. Founded in 1880 in Chicago, it now embraces a whole network of regional sections covering the whole of North America. With its stated object "to stimulate the critical investigation of the classical biblical literatures, together with other related literature, by the exchange of scholarly research both in published and in public forum", the SBL has promoted a wide variety of scholarly activities and can take credit for much of what has been achieved in this field. The history of the SBL is in fact the history of American biblical scholarship.

To South African readers, the most familiar feature of the SBL is no doubt its quarterly publication, the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. The *Journal*, also in its centennial volume, represents only a small part of the SBL's publication program. Less than a decade ago, the Society decided to establish its own publishing house, and Scholars Press came into being. One of the main reasons was the rising costs of academic publishing and the need for more effective scholarly communication. Under the energetic and innovative leadership of Bob Funk, Scholars Press expanded its services by leaps and bounds. Apart from *JBL*, it now publishes *Semeia* and *Semeia Supplements*, a Monograph Series, Dissertation Series, Texts and Translations, Sources for Biblical Studies, Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Masoretic Studies and Aramaic Studies. It has even ventured into "non-biblical" areas and handles memberships of the American Philological Association, American Society of Papyrologists, subscriptions for the International Studies in Philosophy, Sociolinguistics Newsletter and the like. It also offers a book service to members. There can be little doubt that SP has made a major contribution to the effectiveness and scope of SBL's activities.

The expansion of the Press has not been without its difficulties. Financial and administrative problems, aggravated by the move from Missoula to

Chico, California, somewhat dampened the festive mood in Dallas. Some feel that SP has spread its wings too far too fast. It seems that a time of consolidation will follow. Hopefully, the Press will soon be able to resume its important services, be it on a somewhat smaller scale.

The focus at the 1980 Dallas meeting was on two main themes: firstly, evaluation of what has been achieved in a century of American biblical scholarship and secondly, a look at the road ahead. It was not always easy to keep track of these two focal points in the mass of material presented here. Since a number of years, the SBL has joined forces with the American Academy of Religion (AAR) when organizing the annual meeting. With 700 names on the program and thrice the number of participants, the meeting halls of the Anatole and Marriot hotels were crowded for five solid days and often more than a dozen sessions were presented simultaneously. The evenings were reserved for plenary meetings, with the centennial address of Hans Küng attracting the most public attention.

The combined book display by academic publishers is a regular feature at the annual meeting. In 1980 special centennial exhibits were organized by denominational houses, university presses, commercial trade publishers and major text book houses to highlight the partnership between scholars, teachers, students and publishers. In fact, the book display has become a *Frankfurter Buchmesse* of some sorts for publishers in the field of biblical and related studies. Publishing business of all kinds takes place - new books are commissioned, manuscripts tendered, translation rights secured, new trends promoted (including an expanding microfiche service), special offers advertised - all in a relaxed and sociable atmosphere where publisher, author and teacher meet and mingle. Like in South Africa, where distances are great, the meeting serves as an annual rendezvous where a lot of para-academic business is transacted. A typical example is TOIL (Teaching Opportunities Information Listing), a service offered to both employers and employees in religion and aimed at securing optimum academic employment.

Another interesting display was one presented by a group of educational institutions which played a significant role in the advancement of biblical scholarship and which included great names in the American

tradition: Union Theological Seminary, New York, Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew Union College, Princeton Theological Seminary, University of Chicago Divinity School, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt Divinity School. Ample evidence could be found of the American strength in historical studies, philology and archeology. It was not without reason that the American Schools of Oriental Research were invited to share in the Dallas meeting. Their record of pioneering archeological work is impressive. At one session, for instance, reports of no less than seventeen current excavations and surveys were given in the space of six hours. The funds to support these undertakings apparently present no unsurmountable problem.

A new venture at Dallas was the Scholars Press Associates Program. The intention was to present to non-specialists the results of scholarly study of the Bible in the form of lectures or mini-courses. Especially for teachers of Biblical Studies, this was an excellent opportunity to meet with leading scholars, to be updated on the latest research and to get some indication of future developments. Perhaps the specialized academic societies in this country should take a hint and do their bit in offering refresher courses for ministers and teachers of religious instruction.

The general structure of the SBL has much to recommend itself. The approach is much more open and, as can be expected, the membership much wider than more exclusive institutions like the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. The quality of presentations at SBL accordingly differs considerably - from outstanding work to something less than acceptable. The Society encourages its members to participate in its proceedings and although certain formal requirements have to be met, younger scholars often get the opportunity to state their views and to present the results of their research. The work of SBL is divided into 22 sections, which range from archeology and pseudepigrapha through Israelite history, Old Testament theology, synoptic gospels, and Pauline epistles to computer assisted research. In addition, there are 20 seminars or groups at present which work on specific projects according to a fixed program over a period of three to five years. The work of these groups or seminars is evaluated annually and is expected to result in some form of publication. These opportunities to participate in an international research team merit serious consideration by South African scholars.

More information regarding the activities of the SBL is obtainable from

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