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# Hermes and Athena:

*Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology*

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## Three-sided Scholarship: Comments on the Paper of John R. Donahue, S.J.

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With respect to biblical studies I am not even an amateur; I know even less than Professors Dummett and van Inwagen. They said themselves, as you will recall, that they knew very little; and some other people agreed! The good part about my ignorance is that I had the delight of learning a great deal in this conference and particularly from Father Donahue's paper. Scriptural studies do indeed make their presence felt everywhere in religious literature today, so I did know some bits of the history he recounted. These bits are now placed in context through Father Donahue's overview, together with its fascinating look behind the scenes and at new currents in the field. The not-so-good part is that if I am to comment at all, it must be to give my reaction to his paper and to this conference, to what I found and understood here, without much to draw on of my own.

So I will give my impression of the field of scriptural studies, as evidenced here and as described by Father Donahue, and then I shall raise two questions. Both in those questions, and in my prolegomenon to them, I will try to speak as a philosopher looking at and discovering a sister discipline.

### 1. Interpretating Exegesis and Fact Finding

Scriptural studies, which draws on so many other disciplines, appears to me to have three main sides or aspects. The *first* is that

now at least a scriptural scholar can also be at the very same time, and as part of his proper enterprise, a full-fledged participant in certain purely secular academic disciplines. He or she can be a contributor to history, archaeology, and philology, all scientifically pursued. As Father Donahue recounted, this was not always a real possibility for Catholic Bible scholars. It is, I suppose, not necessary for an effective scriptural scholar to also contribute to one of these disciplines, but it is a great and salutary development, which reveals a necessary unification of scholarly endeavors. The nearest parallel in my own area is found in philosophers of physics or biology, who also are physicists or biologists, contributing to the very field on which they draw and reflect in their philosophical work. Health of the discipline may not require so much; but the unity of disciplines which makes that possible is essential.

The *second* side which the discipline shows us is the closest to traditional exegesis, text interpretation, which now draws especially on developments in literary theory. To enhance our understanding of the texts, we need illumination, the uncovering and highlighting of mythical and metaphysical elements, of entwined and tangled themes within themes, of symbols and codes familiar to their original milieu but long since lost to us. That the discipline should draw on the literary theory arsenal of hermeneutics, reception aesthetics, reader response theory, speech act theory, and narrative structure analysis, as well as on deconstructionist, feminist, and Marxist approaches and new studies of rhetoric—all of that seems to me only natural and necessary. It is after all only the natural and necessary attempt to use the tools crafted elsewhere for a similar task.

Obviously, such tools and methods are not to be appropriated uncritically. Personally I have strong suspicions of elitism in reception aesthetics and of self-indulgence in, for example, Bloom's pretense to depth-psychology. I imagine that Father Donahue and others here could quickly add cautions of their own. But I know from my own experience with secular literature how much the new approaches to literary criticism can enhance understanding. My philosophical colleagues are not all of the same mind. To some even such a word as "deconstruction" is like a red flag to a bull already lost in a china shop. I think I know why: various quasi-philosophical battles among the literati tend to steal the limelight from the study of literature. It is our loss,

however, if we let those distract us from the real value of the methods of literary criticism.<sup>1</sup>

Text exegesis, drawing for methods on literary criticism, finds its sources also in the secular disciplines I mentioned as side one. It draws on history, of the authors' and audiences' milieux as well as on history of their literature, on archaeological findings, on philological studies of adjacent literature and traditions, and so forth. It is easy enough to see parallels of this in secular studies. To give an example in my own experience: I needed to learn some art history before I could even see, let alone "read," the pervasive use of symbols in Renaissance paintings, which were of course like familiar words to their original viewers.

But it is the *third* side of the subject which seems to have disturbed philosophers, and which led to some controversy here in our conference. Scriptural studies has a subdiscipline, which is at the same time part of Bible studies and part of secular history, scientifically pursued. I will not try to give this subdiscipline a special name—it must be what van Inwagen called Critical Studies and what Adela Collins meant when she said that her enterprise was concerned with evidence and probabilities, not possibilities. I will characterize it as follows: it is the subdiscipline which (a) focuses on questions of a purely factual and empirically significant sort not different in kind from those addressed by secular historians, but (b) is concerned with events narrated in the Scriptures; and (c) uses only scientific methods, methods that are scientifically respectable and commonly used in secular historical research. As paradigm examples I can take Professors Davis's and Collin's discussions, in our conference, of the question "Was the tomb empty?" and of the more modest but no more easily settled "Did the Apostles believe, within a few days of Jesus' death, that the tomb was empty?" Such questions are not different in kind from those about the Herod's frantic family life or Flavius Josephus's beliefs about the destruction of the temple.

## 2. Is It Science, and Is It Secular?

This is my first question, and I mean to raise it solely about the subdiscipline which I have just characterized, and which I take to have been the special topic of concern of Dummett's and van

Inwagen's papers, as well as the part of scriptural studies practiced before our eyes by Davis and Collins.

You may think that I have already answered myself, because I said that the questions addressed in that subdiscipline are of a kind equally intelligible to a secular historian, and that the methods used are scientific. Nor shall I take back a word of that. I am not intent on disputing that the procedures and reasonings are scientific. But I want to show that this question is real, and remains nevertheless. As you will also see, I am not in a position to answer the question, though I can examine it with reference to the example we have been given here.

I will try to show that the question is a real one first of all by means of some simple examples. Philosophers tend to be generous with abrasive examples, and not always above choosing them with rhetorical intent. To show what could be wrong, I have to use examples of things that have something obviously wrong with them. I want to assure you beforehand that they are not meant to cast indirect slurs on the subject I am now discussing. They are not to be read as insinuating other analogies to Biblical studies—they are here only to highlight the nature of my question.

The first example is a potentially embarrassing one for my own institution. A few weeks before our conference, the *New York Times* ran an article on the Laboratory of Engineering Anomalies at Princeton, which studies psychic phenomena. I have no special inside knowledge of this work, and I try not to prejudge it. But the general reaction I have encountered everywhere, both inside and outside Princeton, is that almost no one is ready or willing to call it science. I can tell you something of the history and intent. J. B. Rhine's work on psychic phenomena at Duke University some thirty years ago was eventually discredited in part because the statistical methods he used, though correct in themselves, could not yield significant conclusions from his *relatively* small sets of data. Experiments using coin tosses, card dealings, and dice rolls to test for clairvoyance and telekinesis were limited by the stamina of the human subjects and the time needed for individual trials. This limitation can be overcome with new technology, which can generate chance events at an incredible rate. Statistical deviations from randomness in such large-scale samples should of course be taken more seriously.

No one I have talked to so far has held either that the Laboratory addresses ill-formulated questions about random sequences, or that the statistical methods differ from those in other engineering research. So is the embarrassed look just prejudice? I don't think so. I think what almost everyone surmises is a certain disparity: namely, that the level of evidence to be had is not commensurate with the questions asked. The questions about statistical deviations in the samples are perfectly good ones, but to even touch the questions about clairvoyance and psychokinesis (which are certainly conceivable) quite another order of evidence would be needed. Let me give a simpler but more blatant example. Suppose I wish to investigate the width of human hair. There is not likely to be any prejudice on this subject. But suppose all I have is an ordinary ruler, and I decide to go ahead anyway. I place the ruler beside a hair, squint at it, and write down "1/65 of an inch." I repeat the procedure a few thousand times, and get others to do the same. To the resulting data base I apply some sophisticated statistical analysis, and I publish the results. I have transgressed no methodological canon. But what I am doing is not science. From a scientific point of view it makes no sense at all. The reason is obviously that the level of evidence is not commensurate with the question.

Consider now the concrete example of a historical investigation we saw here, which addresses those questions about Jesus' tomb. The questions about what exactly the texts say, how much of the text could be attributed to redaction, and so forth, are certainly legitimate and manageable. But let me now try to imagine how would I react to the question whether Jesus' tomb was empty on the third day, were I a secular historian with a strictly scientific approach. First of all, what are the sources where we can expect to find evidence? The Gospels and the Epistles. These were written from at least fifteen to thirty years after Jesus' death, by authors who may not have been present there or even have known Jesus during his lifetime. The documents themselves do not exist except in later copies. In the wealth of historical source material about the Roman empire in the first century, the Jewish wars, and the administration of the territory, we find nothing to shed light on those important first fifty days of the Church, what happened in it, or what it believed then.

Secondly—I say, still in the persona of a secular historian broaching these questions—those documents themselves belong to a class of documents produced by adherents of cults and religious movements, of which we do have many examples in recent history. Think of the Book of Mormon, the writings of Elizabeth Clare Prophet—whose followers are amassing in Montana even now, as our conference proceeds, to await Armageddon. Think also of the revealing histories of such recent movements in which predictions concerning the end of the world were made, and promptly falsified—what beliefs they then developed and proclaimed. All this has been studied extensively by sociologists, and we must conclude that this class of documents taken as a whole is of negligible reliability with respect to the events it narrates, or even with respect to the beliefs which were held at the times of those events. “Negligible” is of course the scientist’s polite word for “zero, or so near zero as is not worth mentioning.” Were Professors Davis and Collins simply secular historians turning to this question, they would not have argued it—they would simply have said “Let’s put it on the shelf for another hundred years and see if some new evidence is found.”

I would like to add some remarks on methodology. For as one follows such discussions, there is often a sense of evidence building up. Of course that cannot really be happening without new evidential input. Perfectly good scientific reasoning includes steps that are not simply deductive; but uncertainty increases and probabilities go down. I think you are familiar with the patterns of reasoning I mean, like

First we face hypotheses *A* versus *B*, and the evidence for *A* is 3% but for *B* it is only 2%, so let us go with *A*—we must now consider *C* versus *D*, but *in view of A*, *C* has a much higher probability than *D*. Next we look at that troublesome bit of evidence *E* that everyone has difficulties with, but it must be pointed out that of the five interpretations of *E* already in the literature, three are incompatible with the conjunction of *A* and *C* to which we agreed above. The remaining two ways in which *E* could be true split into sixteen subcases if we take into account that . . .

and so forth. It sounds like probability, or weight of evidence, or level of confirmation, or whatever it is, is going up—but it is going up only as conditioned on preceding conclusions, and the

absolute probability of the scenario being constructed (*A* and *C* and . . .) is going down, down, down.

The most important point is perhaps just this: analysis of evidence doesn’t increase evidential support if not accompanied by new evidential input. I don’t know how often, in other examples, there is such new input, but Professors Collins and Davis were not bringing each other new bits of evidence. It is possible of course to demolish the arguments one’s opponents give for their conclusions. While Professor Davis argued cogently, his arguments were cogently opposed by Professor Collins. Only, from a scientific point of view, she needn’t have refuted any reasons for belief in the empty tomb—from a scientific point of view there wasn’t any evidence to speak of in the first place. To be sure, neither could one support the opposite conclusion, that the tomb was not empty, solely by such refutations. Even for negative conclusions you need (negative) evidence.

If no new evidence comes from outside, then something else needs to come from outside—for example, what Bultmann so openly states, the prior probability that modern science is correct and applies to Jesus’ body too. But the lengthy arguments about the texts affect those prior probabilities (whatever they are for an empty tomb) only negligibly.

So while I cannot say this of scriptural studies as a whole, of this particular example I say: *it is not science*. The discussion is of no secular scientific interest.

### 3. But Why Is It So Fascinating?

This is my second question, and I’m still raising it about the same subdiscipline. I *am* fascinated—I stayed fascinated throughout, even after I said to myself “This is not science.” For one source of fascination we don’t have far to look—it is the horizon of exegesis. Should we interpret St. Paul as implicitly asserting, or clearly not even mooting, that the tomb was empty? This at least is fascinating, for we have here before us scholars trying to gain religious insight and addressing religious issues important to Christian beliefs. It is clear that they are doing so courageously, even when the verdict about the scriptural sources threatens to

contradict cherished Christian traditions or the traditional scriptural bases for deeply held convictions, whether of faith or of morals. This is not a presuppositionless enterprise—it bears out what Father Donahue echoed us from Joseph Fitzmyer: modern Catholic Bible scholars employ those secular tools and techniques with a theological perspective, “a plus or presupposition,” that the Scriptures are “the Word of God couched in ancient human language.”

But the Roman Curia were also fascinated, already in 1907 when they forbade this to Catholic scholars. Professors Dummett and van Inwagen are fascinated, to the extent of writing lengthy, closely argued papers to demonstrate that they can safely ignore the subject and feel secure that it has not undermined their beliefs. Reluctantly I have come to the conclusion that my own fascination too has a second source: the fascination of the rabbit mesmerized by the headlights of the onrushing car, an inescapable fascination with a threat—a spectre, a devastating possibility. For even if scriptural scholars have actually run ahead of the evidence, even if many of their conclusions have been drawn in part from assumptions we reject—even if all our beliefs so far are still standing today, what about tomorrow?

Imagine then your worst-case scenario. Imagine that historians find manuscripts written by three people in the first century A.D.—one who lived in Galilee, one a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, and a third in Antioch or Ephesus. Imagine these three writers to be as fluent and knowledgeable as Flavius Josephus, independent but mutually confirming, full of data that guide archaeologists to important new sites, and full of information about Jesus and the early Church. Please finish the worst-case scenario for yourself: these sources tell us . . . what? that of all those lives of Jesus written in the last hundred years, the one most abhorrent to you is true, or that the Apostles were a violent group of zealot radicals who became bourgeois as they aged and turned their cause into a lucrative cult . . . finish it yourself, if you have the heart to do it.

Do we really have to ask ourselves this question? We cannot foresee what history and archaeology will uncover. In addition, we believe about our own beliefs that they are true—and hence

compatible with whatever will truly turn up. Short of contradicting ourselves, we can say nothing else. But even so, *how* we would react if new evidence did come to refute our beliefs—not something that hasn’t happened before, after all—is *also* at least in part constitutive of our faith. Imagine a marriage or relationship in which the spectre appears of infidelity, or emotional rejection, or divorce. Even if it has emerged only so far in one partner’s imagination or fear, it will hang there, destructive through its very presence, powerful as long as it is not confronted directly.

So one long, sleepless night last week I struggled with this question: what would I think then? how would I react? how would I emerge from this? It was not at all easy to say what I do believe, or to what degree—as St. Augustine said about what time is, I know it as long as you do not ask me. But that some such scenario would shatter a picture of reality that I cherish, that there once was a carpenter in Whose footsteps we falteringly walk, that is clear. A thousand details could fall individually without harm; if they fell all at once, however, to be replaced by a grinning nightmare, that would shatter what I have. But in the end, and it was coming close to dawn, I found my answer. I said: God, I would not hold it against you. . . .

If something like this happened to any of us, we wouldn’t be alone. Could we face it as Christians together if *that* scenario of evidence about Christianity emerged? *I don’t know.*

After this point I only have questions, and I can’t even begin to suggest answers.<sup>2</sup> That we would have to redescribe our experience in entirely different terms—that is clear. I have the impression that some theologians today are already considering such conclusions from the evidence so far. They are already at work articulating the new understanding of ourselves in relation to God, that we would all be forced to seek if the worst-case scenario came true. We might call that *after the bomb theology*. Is that what ought to be done? I don’t know.

Think again of my earlier analogy of a marriage or relationship. I didn’t mean to suggest that all there is to love, or the main thing or even anything approaching that, is your attitude to how you would react to unfaithfulness or emotional rejection if it came. If such a spectre of possibilities arises it has to be faced. But

on the other hand, if you become morbidly preoccupied, if you obsessively work on your counterfactual plans for life and self-understanding after it comes about—then you will most surely be destroying the relationship just as well. This is exactly what Professor Dummett, and I think from discussion also Professor Plantinga, believe the new theologians to be doing. Is that right? I don't know.

If it is right, though, does that mean that a different theology is needed for everyone who differs reasonably on how much probability our historical evidence, plus evidence for the universal applicability of modern science, allows? A different theology for Adela Collins if indeed she has already concluded that the tomb was not empty and for Stephen Davis who believes that it was? Could we still concentrate on the faith we share? Think of people in different denominations, from Orthodox to Quaker. They seem to differ typically in their factual beliefs, in doctrines. We here at this conference believe (I think) that salvation is not to be found in our own denomination alone. Nor does God's saving work stop at the boundaries of Christendom. Does that not mean that people can share faith despite differing factual beliefs? And if so, could there be a theology that articulates just that shared faith? My ignorance is showing here, for I am sure this has been discussed a great deal—but I don't know.

Or is it perhaps true, as Bultmann seems to have been certain, that we are already beyond all this? Born into twentieth-century Western culture, in a time we did not choose but cannot escape, the life-world we enter at our mother's knee is already thoroughly conditioned by science. Perhaps it is pervaded through and through by a new belief structure so thoroughly different from the "three-story world" that even fundamentalists can only pretend to beliefs which they are no longer capable of having? It may be so. If this is the situation at least for some people, must we insist that grace for them can only consist in re-entering a conceptual world their families left behind a number of generations ago? It sounds like an impossible thing to ask. Or was Bultmann wrong? He thought of each generation as bewitched by the world picture of its own science. But was Bultmann himself bewitched by a deeply flawed philosophy—by *scientism* rather than by science? I don't know.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. Analytic philosophy and literary theory are not nearly such distant strangers as is sometimes thought. For some efforts at the interface, see my (1991) and also e.g. Martha Nussbaum's (1988) and my (1988) in Rorty and McLaughlin.

2. Michael Dummett summed up what I took to be the major reaction to my comments by at least some of the philosophers at the conference: "Undoubtedly there are conceivable empirical discoveries that really would demonstrate the Christian religion to be false; but we need not bother about these, since our belief entails that no such discovery will be made." Here I am taking the liberty to quote from a letter, but I think that this passage only repeats what he and some others said explicitly at the conference. Our difference on this matter, which clearly relates also to my previous note, is probably one of general epistemology, rather than peculiarly about religious faith.

3. In reconstructing my notes for this commentary, after the conference, I benefitted from very helpful comments by Professors Dummett, Plantinga, Stump, Suppe, Swinburne, van Inwagen, and a number of others at the conference, and from comments on a draft by Scott Shalkowski and Eleonore Stump, as well as from discussion and correspondence with Gary Comstock.

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