
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Wonders Await You

Connie Dillman

When I'm asked about my trip to the Holy Land, a sentence or two simply cannot capture the experience. So, I say, "It was wonderful, you should consider going". Perhaps I might even say it was like being on an archeological dig or participating in an anthropology study. Or even, it was like walking the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. All of these are true, but it was Mary, the Mother of Jesus that illumined my trip.

By day five, I had already had

several wonderful cultural experiences and seen many beautiful sites. I was therefore, unprepared for the emotional experience I had at the Church of the Annunciation. As I stood looking at the incredible Madonna art from around the world, I was overwhelmed by Mary's faith in and love for God. When she was visited by the angel Gabriel and told she was to be the Mother of the Son of God, she did not argue with God's plan. She simply accepted His will for her.

Mary's legacy stayed with me through the rest of the trip. She was the mother of Jesus, and yet she was, as am I, a mother. I saw the pain of

mothers throughout the Middle East, the pain of the war, the hate, the devastation of the land, and the fear of the future for their children.

And yet Mary's faith for a better world was present in our conversations with the people of Israel, of the West Bank, of Jordan and Egypt. Palestinian Christian and Muslim high school students, who are clearly tired of the war, working and learning together. Young Israeli women "on strike" from university, because there is no money for tuition assistance told me they are sad because all the money

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Time for a New Paradigm

The Rev. Peter J. Miano

As one of our esteemed alumni, you know The Society for Biblical Studies primarily through your travel experience with us. Those among our alumni who joined us after already having had the experience of traveling with a commercial tour company know the difference between commercial tourism and our unique pilgrimage experiences. I want to remind you that S.B.S.' mission is distinctive, relevant, challenging and potentially transforming. When people ask me if it is safe to travel to the Holy Land, I reply, "No. It might change your life." It is difficult for me to imagine that Jesus died so that our lives might remain unchanged and I am

suspicious of any discipleship that does not transform us. If you want to assess the authenticity of your spiritual experience, ask yourself how it has changed your life.

While travel is the way in which we pursue our mission, we are not a travel company. We are fundamentally and primarily a religious organization with an educational mission. Our mission is simple: to reform biblical scholarship, to redeem pilgrimage and to renew the mission of the Church. For the moment, I would like to focus on the first of these three elements of our mission. What exactly is it about biblical scholarship that needs reforming?

When I was doing my doctoral work, I became acutely aware that bib-

lical scholarship renews itself about every ten years. All the more astonishing, then, is the reality that the paradigm for teaching and learning about the Bible has not changed in 150 years! In churches, Bible study usually occurs in an informal classroom setting with a leader/facilitator who guides more or less eager participants. In seminaries, the Bible is taught in more formal classrooms by specialists who lecture to more or less eager students. There, the Bible is studied in the comfort of libraries and in the safety of classrooms. The academy is a sheltered environment. How do we expect to transform sheltered seminarians into courageous pastors for a challenging world? Rather than luring students away from

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Journey With A Friend

THE SOCIETY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES IS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO BIBLICAL AND MISSION EDUCATION, FACILITATING MISSION EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL. IT ENABLES CLERGY AND LAITY TO STUDY THE BIBLE AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LANDS OF THE BIBLE. THE PURPOSES OF THE SOCIETY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES ARE TO REFORM SCHOLARSHIP BY MAKING IT ACCESSIBLE, RELEVANT AND USEFUL; TO REDEEM THE IDEA OF PILGRIMAGE FROM COMMERCIAL TOURISM; TO RENEW THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.

The Rev. Gene Young

The Journey to Israel with The Society for Biblical Studies was a journey with a friend. An 86 year old who said, "I don't use a credit card much. Might not be here to pay it off." I nearly caused him to have a heart attack our second day in Bethlehem. I was showering while he was still sleeping early that second morning. His bed was just on the other side of the bathroom wall. I slipped in the small metal shower stall and went straight backwards through the plastic curtain and struck the wall right next to Pappy's bed. I hit with a bang you could hear 40' away I'm sure. Pappy nearly jumped clean out of his bed he said. He ran into the bathroom and I was still laying on the floor against the wall, checking to see if I had all my parts and some still working. "No blood, no foul" said Pappy with a grin. Pappy's nose turned slightly left the rest of the journey where it previously had been straight. It was that kind of Journey for us.

Two friends walking where Jesus had walked. Laughing at life the way Jesus laughed at life. Weeping in the midst of silence that has its own voice with our tears washing away the pain of coming to understand the violence and loneliness and broken hearts of people God loves when violence and prison walls separate humanity for all the wrong reasons.

"I've seen Europe" Pappy said, (via Omaha Beach in 1944). "I want to see the land of The Bible and I want you to be there to help me see it." (I had been Pappy's Pastor for four years.)

So we did. We stood in our

fifth floor room overlooking Lake Genesaret in Galilee, marveling at the sunrise and understanding Jesus saw it the same way— with wonder and awe at His Father's handiwork. We sat silently as the small fishing boat caressed the waves of the Galilean lake and listened to the Scriptures read that spoke of God's own journey with other fishermen not unlike our family of pilgrims gathered along the rails.

We stood on the hillside and absorbed the sweep of the flowered slopes down to the lake where Jesus

The Journey to Israel with S.B.S. was a journey with a friend... We came home with more questions raised than answered. We returned with a thankful heart...

cast his heart and mind and God's own desires into the hearts of those who cast their nets of hopes and dreams into the deep abyss of unknown futures with The Man From Galilee.

We stood along River Jabok and listened to Jacob's struggle story one more time and found our struggles not unlike his; some of them a matter of life and death; all

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The Baggage We Carry

The Rev. Dave Barnhart

It's the little things that first got my attention: the chilly nip of the Jordanian weather, blood-red poppies growing in a field, the contrast of white iPod earbuds against a brown hijab on a Muslim teenager. I became aware of tiny, half-formed prejudices and assumptions that chafed against reality. Traveling to the Holy Land forced me to turn out my pockets and get rid of some preconceived notions I had carried around.

After we deplaned, I marveled at the weather. In middle school I had learned about the "Fertile Crescent," and I had read Biblical references about farming and grazing. I'd read scriptures that made reference to water falling on a "thirsty land," and springs "pouring water into ravines." But I'd also grown up seeing Americans shake their heads and roll their eyes at whatever latest news came from the Middle East, and I'd heard them wonder, "why would people fight over a desert or a pile of rocks?" In Sunday school, I'd seen cartoonish drawings of Jesus or Moses set against generic backgrounds, as if the land were not important. So I wasn't prepared to see a place so lush, with such varied microclimates and such diverse flora. I hadn't realized that

Traveling to the Holy Land forced me to turn out my pockets and get rid of some preconceived notions

my brain contained two completely inconsistent ideas about the land.

As we toured, I became aware of my cultural preference for "unspoiled" archaeological sites over religious sites. We contemporary Americans venerate things by placing fences around them, declaring them "historical," passing laws to keep them as they are. "This is the very log cabin Abe Lincoln was born in," we say (even if it's not true) and we get a thrill out of walking the same streets Jesus walked, trying to see things "as they were." But for 2000 years people have venerated sites in a different way: by leveling the surrounding area and building a church on top of them. At first, visiting the Churches of the Holy

Sepulchre, the Nativity, the Flagellation, I felt very alienated from the historical events they commemorate. All I could see were layers of gilt, marble, and oil. But I gradually became aware of a spiritual landscape—the layers of history that get plastered over the places and events of the Bible. And I realized that even when I stare at the original foundation of a building, or see a road where Jesus

walked, I'm still looking through layers of history. Trying to get under those layers at the historical Jesus is still an important exercise, but to ignore the spiritual landscape around it and the layers that generations of pilgrims and religious seekers have put on top of

it is to miss knowing something about what it means to be human, to worship, to go on pilgrimage.

Finally, I was forced to confront my contemporary prejudices. I realized that we've been surrounded by a rhetoric of despair about the Middle East. "They've been fighting for thousands of years" is an off-hand remark I've often heard in churches about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. It's a convenient despairing myth that gets passed around, like the "fighting over a desert" trope, which allows us to shrug our shoulders and get on with not caring about U.S. foreign policy. But these statements are lies, and distort not only history and geography, but also our response. Driving from Jerusalem to Bethlehem under a 30-foot high concrete wall, topped with barbed wire and machine guns, while a giant tourism banner that said "peace be with you" fluttered in the breeze, I felt exactly how complicit I've been in perpetuating war even though Jesus asks me to be a peacemaker. I will no longer repeat conventional wisdom that forecloses on the possibility of peace.

Going to the Holy Land was a spiritually cleansing experience. I wish all American Christians could have the same experience of bringing unconscious prejudices into the light so that we can name them and leave them behind. When we do, we receive an incomparable gift of understanding and a passion for peace.

The Rev. Dave Barnhart is from Birmingham, Alabama

Journey, *cont'd.*

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requiring Faith that is beyond our understanding and the convenience of time's relentless march against our demands for answers.

We prayed at the Wailing Wall. We walked the narrow streets of The Old City of Jerusalem. We went to the Bethlehem birthing place and the Jerusalem Outside-The-Wall hanging place and wrestled with the incongruity of it all and like so many asked "why" when we already knew the answer but didn't like it much.

We laughed together, we cried together, we broke bread together, we listened to the refugee camp dwellers speak of freedom-not-yet and the West Bank settler view of birthright forever conversations. We sat in the sunlight of a Kibbutz hillside and listened to Lydia Eisenberg speak of her journey from South Wales to Israel and the shame of being Jewish and being told in London as she looked for a place to live: (via a sign posted at a rental flat) "No Jews, Blacks or dogs; and Irish need not apply". Like the experience of just a few days earlier as we stood at Mt Nebo looking at the Promised Land the way Moses looked at it knowing he could not enter, we wondered how one so lonely in the Journey is supposed to overcome such canyons between hopes and dreams and God's promises of a homeland. Such stories made us wonder about the "Leap of Faith" stories we have heard and pondered if our understanding was just a religious cliché.

Pappy and I came home with more questions raised than answered. We returned with a thankful heart for the guidance of one Peter Miano and The Society of Biblical Studies staff.

And we are glad that "The End is not yet."

The Rev. Gene Young is from

A New Paradigm, *cont'd.*

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the world and into the library, The Society for Biblical Studies invites its participants to engage their Bibles only after engaging the world.

In the academy, learning is measured by performance on tests and papers. The primary mechanisms for studying and learning is reading texts, listening to lectures and writing papers. In either case, the Bible is an object. It is examined from the outside looking in. Especially in the biblical academy, the Bible is subjected to careful scrutiny as if it were a specimen under a microscope. Scholars champion values of objectivity, often claiming to be scientific, as if being "scientific" is the measure beyond all others. The primary faculty is reason. The heart is not usually a part of the process. By contrast, we invite our participants to cultivate a holistic approach to the Bible that involves not only the intellect, but also the passions, the will and the body.

Moreover, especially in the biblical academy, including seminaries and graduate schools of religion, the study of scripture presumes distinct assumptions about gaining knowledge that are usually unstated and almost always uncritically accepted. Almost all contemporary study of scripture in the biblical academy presumes that knowledge about the Bible is gained by analyzing its component parts. This is why generations of seminarians have groaned under the weight of the historical-critical method. This presumption, however, is far from self evident and nowhere is it proved. Further, it leads to a level of specialization in the field of biblical studies—not to mention other academic disciplines—that is more appropriate for

insects than it is for people. Specialists in one area usually do not have the time to access information from specialists in another area. It is rare, for example, when insights from classical studies are imparted to biblical scholars and vice versa. While biblical studies is fundamentally an enterprise requiring historical investigation, few biblical scholars are trained in history and many make errors that no historian would make. For example, the frequency with which anachronism infects biblical scholarship is shocking.

Even more troubling is the simple reality that the extraordinary

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insights produced by the specialists in the biblical academy rarely, if ever, find their way out of the tight circle of specialists who produce them. Scholars write almost exclusively for other scholars. Research is conducted in remote settings and is increasingly irrelevant to any social environment. These factors conspire to produce a result that should be alarming to all. Churches are filled with clergy and laity who are handicapped with outdated information and scholars answer questions that no one is asking. By contrast, S.B.S. makes biblical scholarship accessible to the rank and file of the Church. The world is our classroom is there is not a better one in any seminary. Meanwhile, the academy diligently avoids the pressing moral challenges of our world. One colleague of mine stated that, in fact, those who press for relevance are often ostracized or even punished.

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Wonders, *cont'd.* A New Paradigm, *cont'd.*

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goes to security. Mothers living in a horrible refugee camp starting a school for their children. Hope and faith.

As we visited more sites—the Sea of Galilee, the Mount of the Beatitudes, and the Church of the Multiplication of Fishes and Loaves—I thought of Mary and her love for Jesus and even her fear for him. And when we walked the Via Dolorosa, I felt Mary's sorrow to witness her son being tortured and crucified.

As I entered the Church of the Resurrection, I prepared myself for the site of the crucifixion and burial. I did not know I would see another site—the rock where Jesus was laid after being taken from the Cross. A beautiful mosaic depicts Mary helping prepare her son's body for burial. I felt such grief and sadness for Mary and for the world.

The tomb is the next stop and it is empty—a reminder of Christ's resurrection. Mary's joy to know her Son was raised from the dead became my joy and hope.

The Holy Land trip was, above all, an experience so profound that it is with me still. And if you ask me about it, I'll say, "It was wonderful, you should consider going". And if you do, wonders await you.

Connie Dillman is from Indianapolis, Indiana

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The main guild of biblical scholars is The Society of Biblical Literature. I am a card carrying member. There are over 8,000 other card carrying members. Four times a year, it publishes riveting scholarly articles such as *4Q448, Pslam 154 (Syriac), Sirach 48:20, and 4QpIsa; No NU in Line 2 of 7Q5: A Final Disidentification of 7Q5 with Mark 6:52-53; and The Use of Paly in Ephesians 6:12.*

I am not embarrassed to admit that I have not read these articles. I dare say, however, that they will not help me understand vexing existential questions. They will not help me respond to the challenges of war or equip me to reassure a Palestinian refugee that God cares for him, even though his expellers turn to the Bible, i.e., *the Word of God*, and site passages where God authorizes Israel not only to expel the "other," but to kill him.

I am by no means the first person to observe that the dominant paradigm of biblical scholarship is increasingly obsolete, increasingly irrelevant and therefore in need of reform. In his review of Raymond E. Brown's magnum opus *Introduction to the New Testament*, Anthony Saldarini observed that in the 1,500 pages of text, not one paragraph answered the question, "What difference does it make?" Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza has pointedly critiqued the dominant paradigm of biblical scholarship (1999: *Rhetoric and Ethics: The Politics of Biblical Studies*). However, no one critiqued the academy more courageously than the late Michael Prior, who pointed out that the dominant paradigm of biblical

scholarship is not only irrelevant, but that it is morally deficient in that it has failed to prevent the use of the Bible as a blunt instrument in the process of Western colonialism. Indeed, he declared, the biblical academy is often complicit in advancing positions that legitimate colonial domination. In particular, he sited the cases of the Iberian conquest of Central America, the Dutch conquest of South Africa and the Zionist conquest of Palestine. In all three arenas, the primary source of validation of colonization was the Bible. Surely, he argued, the biblical academy has an obligation to examine the moral values embedded in the biblical narratives, especially when the texts are applied in contemporary contexts with catastrophic consequences.

As a conscientious Christian, I find it troubling that God is depicted in the Bible as a mass murderer (Exodus 12:29).

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Does God really require the murder of innocent male children? Just as troubling is that when biblical texts depicting rape, incest, murder, slavery, genocide, the subjugation of women and human sacrifice are studied in the academy, no one seems to take note that the most common contemporary moral codes require higher standards of conduct than many of those depicted in the Bible. In many cases, the biblical narratives depict God as requiring the faithful to commit actions that would be considered war crimes if they were committed on a contemporary battlefield. (Numbers 31: 1-15)

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I believe that as conscientious Christians, we have an obligation to examine such biblical texts and admit that their moral values are not harmonious with our own. At the very least, such an admission should mitigate against their being applied with wooden literalism. It might even open us up to new and deeper readings of God's Word. Maybe God is scratching her head about such texts as much as I am. Surely the God we worship has higher moral standards than the Geneva Conventions.

Biblical scholarship needs reforming and the mission of The Society for Biblical Studies is exigent, because the dominant paradigm for biblical study and teaching is neither accessible, relevant nor useful to those who populate the pews of churches across

America, to say nothing of those who stand in the pulpits. Moreover, the dominant paradigm has acquiesced in the face of the wholesale abuse of the Bible. S.B.S. offers an alternative.

...the biblical faith is spiritually redemptive only when it is socially responsible.

Rather than relying on the study of texts to glean insight into the Bible, we invite our participants to engage the Bible in specific contexts. Rather than invite our travelers to avoid personal

involvement, we ask them to risk identifying with those who suffer, to open their hearts to the suffering of others *and then* turn to the pages of scripture. Indeed, in my humble opinion, the beginning of Bible study is a broken heart. Rather than encourage withdrawal from the world to the study or the classroom or the library, we insist on immersing ourselves in the world. Feeling the moral challenges resident around us, we ask different questions about the Bible. When we are cloistered away in the comfort of our studies, we might find fascinating the textual variations of the long ending of Mark. When we sit in the middle of a refugee camp or at a checkpoint, when we see a home being bulldozed or a 400 mile wall under construction, textual criticism seems sadly uninteresting.

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ing. Instead of asking about sources and redactors, we might ask instead, what does this Bible say about our moral obligation to combat injustice or systems of oppression? When we immerse ourselves in a context in which the Bible is used to legitimate warfare or colonization, we find ourselves asking how do we know that this ancient document is applicable to us today?

We call it *contextual study*, but by this we don't mean merely the study of the ancient contexts in which the biblical narratives were formed. Contextual study is study of the Bible in a *contemporary* context. An S.B.S. travel program is distinctly different from a choreographed, sanitized commercial tour in that we endeavor to engage the moral challenges of the places through which we travel. We do this, not merely because it is fascinating, but more importantly because if we do not, we cannot impart to our participants

the realization that the biblical faith is relevant to our world and that the ethical mandates of the Gospel faith are still redemptive imperatives today.

In my experience, nothing deepens personal faith more than learning and relearning that the biblical

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faith is spiritually redemptive only when it is socially responsible. There is no personal relationship with the risen Christ that does not also imply social obligations. For some, spirituality is naively associated with withdrawal from the world, as if seclusion and solitude are the ultimate ends of the spiritual person. But none of the his-

torical icons of spirituality, from the desert mothers and fathers to Thomas Merton and Mother Theresa remained cloistered in their cells. On the contrary, their quietude equipped them with the fortitude to engage ministries of compassion and justice. Want to know another test of the authenticity of spirituality? Ask yourself what you are doing with it.

It is an error, conditioned by the political climate of America, that induces us to look for *human rights* in scripture. The phrase *human rights* does not occur anywhere in the Bible. Instead, we find *human obligations* to address the social, moral and political challenges of our day, just as Jesus did in his. Biblical study should lead to inspired action in and for the world. An academy—or a Church—that studies the Bible to find a basis for entitlement is an academy—and a Church—that is in need of reform.