If That Was Then, What Is Now? James Muilenburg, Ourselves and Religious Discourse

Paper Presented at PCTS Meeting, November 7-8, 2014

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

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orientation

In many ways, 1939 was a long time ago. That point will likely have been over-rehearsed before the meeting begins, in which case we can skip this rumination. Even without it, all of us old enough to be present at this gathering will have many ways of appreciating how long ago 1939 was.

On the other hand, of course, it is also fairly recent. What I want to position here, in order to arrive at 1939 (as well as to hop ahead briefly to 1969, when Professor Muilenburg made a contribution to his field more momentous than the one we are considering today) before heading for the present, is the long story of biblical studies and its participation in a more general religious discourse. Much of this is familiar, but it is important to re-think these matters on the clock, so to speak, not only so that we know where Professor Muilenburg was coming from but so that we find ourselves on the map, and—more important, now—that we know toward what points our students need to be preparing to head, so we may assist them.

Let me offer my information in several large steps, taking long strides and watching the hands of our imaginary clock move quickly, for the most part, toward 12n. You can name the n: noon or midnight.

the pre-modern past of biblical studies

For ease of understanding, I'm going to assume a 3000 year span, which begins our quest that pauses in 2014 in the year 984 BCE. That date, as you likely know, puts us in the reign of

the *textual* King David of Judah/Israel, whose Bible date of accession is conveniently put at 1000. So the *setting* for the monarchy is the start of the tenth century. In *historical* terms, it seems likely that the people the Bible and we call Israel had emerged distinctively, though not in quite the way the Bible presents that event. To name simply two large pieces of information that would have been quite startling and contested well past 1939: First, there is fair consensus now that Israel/Judah (whom I will call Israel from now on, meaning the biblical people and the ancestors of Jews) emerged *indigenously* from northern Semitic/Canaanite peoples (rather than being racially distinctive and im-merging from elsewhere);[1] and second, that the powerful founding group was not David's Judah but the northern kingdom tribal groups (often called Ephraim), Judah being a *backwater* for some time longer and *taking over from Israel* the narrative of the more prosperous group when finally they finally arrived in a place of prominence.[2] But in any case, the work of Professor Muilenburg's SFTS colleagues, Robert Coote and Marvin Chaney has contributed signally and usefully to the work done to find the *reliable historical beginnings* of Israel (the whole people), and that appears now to be by the 8th century, only a short time (a couple of hundred years) after our 984 date.

the production of biblical texts phase:

If it is important both to position and then to adjust origins of what becomes the biblical people and their narrative, we need to pause briefly over the matter of "happened." It's clear enough that the OT and NT each privilege (though not consistently or exclusively) a sense of

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[1]See Patrick Mazani, "The Appearance of Israel in Canaan in Recent Scholarship," in *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang: 2006), 95-109.

[2]This issue is rehearsed in the work of Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

order that is chronological, causal, roughly historical. We can see this in macro and micro structures of many biblical narratives, sufficient to think that they came to appreciate the way things move along in time. I think it likely that the people who produced the material we now call the Bible assumed that their materials were reliable about the past, but not so much from a sense of history but because of the reliability, general consistency, and truthfulness of God. I think it also true that both Jews and Christians saw patterns in the traditional material and thought they emerged from God's planned deeds.

But what is also likely is that these biblical ancients lacked much awareness of the kinds of precise queries or assumptions about "happenedness" that western moderns have, the sort we picked up from the 17th century on. So when we are talking of what the human and participant Bible-generators thought, we do well to avoid the words "historical," "true," "accurate" as well as to scruple over theological cousin words: "infallible," "inerrant," and so forth. The ancients did not live in that world. They had a vastly smaller experience of change, of difference, than do moderns, and no way to look up or imagine material that they did not know about. It is difficult to over-estimate the difference in worldviews. God's reliability was not tied specifically or tightly to "happened,"though was not necessarily held distinct either. It was not really a deeply examined question, could not have been. In my experience of teaching these matters, this is a point to appropriate thoughtfully: The obsession with historical happenings is modern.

<u>the post-production/pre-critical commentary phase:</u>

When we get to the moment that re-writing of and commentary on biblical material begins (which for Jews is sooner than for Christians, so as the "extra-biblical" material begins to pile up toward the end of the previous era), proceeding for both Jews and Christians steadily up

to modernity (the 17th century in this present conversation), there is not a big change. Jews comment and annotate in a sort of set of concentric circles with Torah at the hub, crossing edges as they move out in scope and on in time without much worry.[3] Christians do not feel they can add to the canon, and so they comment on those materials, annotate them, more conscious of what is and is not biblical.[4] The general assumption of all these ancients is that the texts are important to have and interpret, offer wisdom and insight in a sort of layered and ongoing way. Both Jews and Christians were conscious of plumbing levels: the literal/historical, the allegorical, tropological, anagogical, or *peshat, remes, derash, sod* (plain meaning,allusive meaning, solicited meaning, secret meaning).[5] There is not a lot of interest in the historical problems and issues, but there is not none. Just to sample the matter for Christians: Early commentators like Jerome, the Antiochene commentators (ca. 4-5 century), the Victorines (ca. 12 c.) were interested in historical matters, asked apt questions, did good work.[6]

But the main interest was theological/spiritual, the discerning from the texts truth that was able to be helpful in the spiritual life. And the assumptions about useability were a sort of one size fits all (monk and everyone else), and a confidence that God placed in the biblical materials what humans needed and could access, but not primarily through history *per se.* The

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[3]An excellent overview of Jewish interpretation can be found in Matthias Henze, ed., A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012).

[4]This material is rehearsed in Richard N. Soulen, Sacred Scripture: *A Short History of Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009) and more classically in Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd edition, revised and enlarged (n.p.: Fortress Press, 1963 and 1984).

[5]Emmanuel Levinas, "On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures," in *Beyond the Verse* (London: Athlone Press, 1994) 101-114.

[6]Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 2: From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages,* trans. James O. Duke (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), notably chs. 1, 3.

default assumption was probably "happened," but it was not a big topic. But during this long stretch study of the Bible moved first from monasteries to the schools and then to the universities, wher it began to fall more heavily under the influence of scholastic ways of thinking (from 13th century onward, slowly). The point to grasp, of course, is that for most of the time our 3000 year clock has been ticking—for ???of its time—pre-critical interests dominated.

watershed: Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment:

Running all of these together, since we are stepping very broadly, this is a *genuine watershed moment/phase* and we are near 11 o'clock on our timepiece. We can think as follows: The Renaissance, coming to see biblical texts as not lying outside the norms and procedures that pertained to texts in general, began (or intensified) to study biblical texts with recourse to the same critical tools employed for all ancient literary materials. For most renaissance scholars, there was nothing irreverent, but it was a change. Many new questions could be presented to biblical texts, and they were answered not from authority but from the same paths that brought fresh insight to all the classics.[7]

The Reformation added to the erosion of authority of the Bible, not least by challenging successfully the notion that a small cadre of men in Rome was in charge of meaning. The reformers also, to some extent, began to scrape away the great chains of commentary that had come to surround (or imprison) the biblical text and read Scripture afresh. There was a backlash against the scholasticism of theology most clearly associated with Rome, accompanied by a resolve to be more critical about some of the layered or figural reading (allegorical or

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[7]See Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 3: Renaissance, Reformation, Humanism*, trans. James O. Duke (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010).

typological) that had long-dominated biblical interpretation. Often when we (some of us) read the early reformers, it still seems quite classic, Calvin sounding like Augustine than like the moderns. But a corner had been turned.

The Enlightenment, assisted as it was by the scientific revolution and age of exploration, contributed even more massively to changes in how the Bible was seen, read. We can think of these events in terms of ground glass:[8] The *telescope* that made possible new science, new navigation and exploration, new economics and politics, new theories about macro-realities. The *microscope* exposed many previously unseen, unknown and un-imagined realities to awareness, such that many things that had once been credited to God's control came to be recognized as natural. We can drop Charles Darwin into place here, with his vast challenge to pre-critical biblical study, and we can appreciate the technology that would move Bible reading into the lives of ordinary people. And we can think of *glasses* worn by scholars, enabling them to see and read and study beyond what would have been possible before that, and we can take those glasses as emblematic of opening up huge realms of study, all with an impact on how the Bible was read. These glasses, all of them, changed the world in which scholars lived, including scholars of the Bible, and appeared to challenge all the assumptions of the previous eras, including the *value and reality* of the Bible, resting, apparently, on the *testimony of history and science represented* in the Bible. We almost need new words here, to talk about matters "scientistic," and "historistic," in order to appreciate the new precision about whether matters did or did not conform to the many new "istic" things emerging with the aid of "new glasses," assisted as those were by the

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[8]This wonderful image for expanded vision and insight was offered by Alistair Cook in one of the PBS series on Western Civilization. I am unable to track exactly which series featured it, but that I remember it from viewing it about thirty years ago testifies to its strength.

(comparatively) new freedoms of Renaissance and Reformation. Once the biblical realities came under attack (or appeared to do) then issues of "happenedness" and "ontological accuracy" took up homes in theology and became newly or at least freshly associated with theology. There was no need for this sooner. It is a modern phenomenon, a fruit of the vast "17th century" shifts. Words like authority, reliability, truth, triads like historical reliability, facticity, and truth make a fresh claim if not new appearance. And, as is well known, the Bible had a hard time, at least for a while. It appeared that much of what it said (or assumed) was undercut by all that could be seen with "the new glasses."

Biblical study, as is also well known, went even more resolutely academic than before, now not so much theologically-scholastic but in terms of the historical referents of texts, the processes of their formation, the complexities of their growth and redaction. The authority and truthfulness of such material depended on the reliability of transmitters and on conformity with what was coming now to be freshly scrutinized and known. The religious truth that survived such study was sidelined, especially if it did not seem well-linked to the historical/scientific lenses. The language seemed less important, the religious claims in some ways foolish or worse. Much worse!

Many things went along with these realities, not least the vast social changes (think industrial revolution, urbanization, accumulation and dissolution of empires of the European powers, rise of Freudian psychology, Marxian political theory, the new adventures in social sciences) and eventually the world wars existing with other vast challenges to pre-critical biblical study. Many biblical scholars were religious professionals, ordained, leaders in their churches, believers. In the broad strokes we are using here, the clearest thing to say is that there was

typically a sort of split or disconnect between what was studied and taught on weekdays and what was proclaimed on Sunday, so a mostly unacknowledged chasm between desk and pulpit. Some of these men ceased to be believers, or Bible-people, if I can put it like that, secretly or publicly, consciously or less so. By that generalization, I am aiming to suggest that the implications of what we might call "Bible unreliability" were not tracked with the care that might seem called for. The greatest of the biblical scholars (and here I am really talking about Christian scholars of the Old Testament) did not seem to spend much time trying to resolve the apparent impasse between where biblical studies seemed to have gotten and the matter of Scripture as a valuable and reliable, a truthful and meaningful discourse. Things were left to lie where they had fallen, a point to which I will return shortly when I characterize the students I teach at GTU. It's not a matter of what they might or should have done but a characteristic of the era of early modernity, that the crevice that had opened was largely and not insincerely avoided.

1939:

The moment we are discussing today falls right into the midst of the "fat" part of this modern period—scant minutes before the hour of 12; it is a moment whose own challenges do not become fully manifest until at least the next third of the twentieth century. So we are ready to hear what Muilenburg had to say and how it signifies before moving a little farther ahead on our clock.

the 1939 paper:

Though I know you all have read this paper, let me nonetheless offer a summary, both in order to situate it in the sweep we have just reviewed and also to lift out what seems most salient seventy-five years later and what may wish to discuss here today. Like every wonderful paper, it

starts with the question it wishes to probe: "What Is Essential in Christian Religion?" and how will Christian theologians discuss that topic with others, notably with historians of religion. Muilenburg grants the distinctiveness of the two fields, the particular training of each set of scholars, what they value, how they read common texts (and data). With reference to the one he calls the Central Personality of NT texts, urging that the mode of inquiry be condign with the values of that figure, he warns Christian theologians (I infer), not to be tempted to cut the Gordian knot, that is to skip historical things and settle into the theological. History remains crucial. We would expect no less of a biblical scholar of this era, when things historical are so prominent, in a way they were not in theology. Beyond a doubt, he continues, something "new" emerged in the NT, granting that "new" is perhaps an overvalued word. Jesus and his project emerged from something old, and so, again, the investigation into history is crucial, the uncovering of the historical-social (and economic-religious) factors of Israel's existence among subsequent empires (Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian). Muilenburg insists that scholars of religion need to understand those contexts, and the representative prophets help us to do so, perhaps Jeremiah in particular, who referenced not only the events of his own day but went back to his people's earlier moments a well, notably Sinai. [paragraphs 1-5] Jeremiah's contributions to historical understanding are sampled [paragraph 6], Ezekiel's as well [#7]. Muilenburg suggests that these two great prophetic figures represent different responses to the issues of the era, as do the other biblical witnesses as well.

As the tradition passes into the hands of the church—by which I believe he means a priest-led (rather than king-led) Hebrew/Jewish people, wisdom materials are prized (Psalms, Job), as those materials reference as well, if differently and more opaquely, social issues. He

concludes that paragraph [#8] by noting how multi-faceted was Judaism, such facets requiring from scholars careful and thorough consideration. Muilenburg has a difficult time pulling away from the pervasive influence of Jeremiah on the Hebrew tradition, the other great prophets as well, urging that Second Isaiah "exhausts" every OT figure and "I think of the New [Testament] also, to give expression to his own radical theism" (p. 6). [#s 9-10] But he stresses that this is not simply literary allusion but "rich and pregnant context" as well, by which he means historical. Muilenburg then moves on to talk about the Isaian servant and the challenges of interpreting and understanding the coherence of the servant material in second Isaiah. Here he makes his clearest hermeneutical move, suggesting that his Christian theologian PCTS audience read the passages from an end-of-the age perspective, similar to how certain other key texts are read: And what he seems to be urging is that the end-of-the-age position is that of God active, God about to do a "new" thing among the nations: the end of the world as we know it, sun, moon being replaced by God's radiance (Isaiah 60). [11-12]

As he moves to conclude this essay, he summarizes that the point has been to demonstrate the links between Christianity and its antecedents, calling on Handel's *Messiah* to suggest and represent all that was not able to be expressed in his paper. Christianity, Jesus, the gospels are not understandable without the Isaiah texts, and Muilenburg's point is that we need to know, to know actively all this resonating material, this history, and he goes on to provide Isaian intertexts with gospel passages, a set of material permeating the gospels. [13] He concludes with five principles, which he says "force themselves upon us." Paraphrased: 1) The terms and referents of Hebraism and Judaism need chronological distinguishing (Jeremiah implying Hebrew, Ezekiel Jewish); 2) the lines linking Jeremiah and Ezekiel to early Christianity are clear; 3) OT prophets

and beyond are strongly represented in the life of the historical Jesus, indeed also in the heritage represented by Paul; 4) the early Christian movement needed and sought its historical dimension, knowing that such was necessary for God's revelation; 5) to understand essential Judaism and Christianity, historical study is vital, else the actual character of the religion(s) will be lost. Again, vintage biblical studies of the era.

And he pauses to name five tentative conclusions [all these on pp. 8-9]: 1) The logic of Christianity is toward universality, cued by the Isaian text; 2) the prophets' radicalness is most clearly seen in Jesus' love command; 3) the person of Jesus is central for Christianity, though, an importantly, the impact of this unique figure is not without significant trace in the OT; 4) to understand Jesus and Christianity is to make use of the categories of crisis and continuity, a pattern important in the OT, in the NT, and in subsequent church events; 5) it must be owned as essential to Christianity that God was in Christ reconciling the world, in line with the Hebrew/Jewish understanding as well.

What is the *subtext* here, the phantom grappling with an opponent that Muilenburg is performing here with, as audience, a presumably compatible group of colleagues, not necessarily sharing his interest in Hebrew biblical studies but generally sympathetic to the point of view he is arguing? That is, I hear that the serious opponents of his point of view are not very explicitly referenced "in" his text or likely "at" the meeting—nor does he help us by naming them in footnotes; but the group with which he shares this paper understand generally what he is talking about and want to know what he thinks.[9] I infer that the issues are: 1) Is Christian theology

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[9]I became quite eager to track this matter of his opponent/interlocutor, and my first set of suspects was the set of New testament hermeneuts associated with the names of David Strauss, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Heidegger; the story of their contributions to language philosophy and interpretation can be sampled in David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004) and more extensively in Anthony

adequate for a reading of biblical texts, or must historical considerations held to be important? 2) Is there any serious "take-away value" in Hebrew Bible/OT/Jewish tradition, or can it be dispensed with and considered overtaken by later NT/Christian events? 3) Is God's "early work" still of value, or has it been pretty well superseded in what happened with Jesus? 4) Can one adequately represent Christian religion without knowing and thus having studied history, and Hebrew/Old Testament history specifically? You may hear others.

What is *prescient and valuable*? Since we have just reviewed how biblical studies had become caught up in historical issues to the virtual exclusion of other matters, it seems Muilenburg senses that theology (as distinct from either biblical studies or the history of religions) might try to do an end run, cut the Gordian knot, might in practice if not in theory eschew the contributions of the Old Testament. Christian theologians, systematic theologians, were less distracted by historical matters than biblicists were, and Muilenburg is saying that history must be done, in both testaments. He may be experiencing the chasm between biblical material, especially OT, and systematic theology that has not disappeared even at the present moment. The fifty year anniversary of Roman Catholicism's Vatican 2 has generated a number of (mostly) congratulatory studies, among them celebrations of the document *Dei Verbum* on divine revelation, cheek by jowl with valorizations of the biblical work by the two bishops of Rome prior to the present one, who seem to do their work on biblical texts not from what is

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C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009). My thought was that, comparatively speaking, these scholars somewhat sideline the sort of thing that Muilenburg seems to stress. I received a rather blunt communication from Durwood Foster who told me that Muilenburg was "still inveighing shrilly against the 'ahistorical' interpretive orientation he perceived to have been dominant in the liberal theological approach to the OT and the Bible generally...Probably no one exemplified it better than Harry Emerson Fosdick...." Foster summarized that the opposing viewpoint was "abstractable universal truths" rather than "Heilsgeschichte"(This information came in an e-mail dated 4/28/2014).

suggested in *Dei Verbum* but from systematic theology.[10] So, yes, problem. I might even say that in the school where I teach, the Bible and its study are considered relatively unimportant, and Thomas Aquinas reigns as the expert on all matters, including the Bible.

I may be listening too aware of all that came after 1939, but I hear Muilenburg quite unequivocal about the value of the Hebrew and Jewish heritage. If he knew from what he read or from the German establishment that unequivocally set and dominated agendas for biblical study, perhaps especially OT work, that things Jewish were under attack, he is not giving any quarter there, that I can hear. He is maintaining that biblical study is about the great acts of God, as presumably theology is as well, history of religions perhaps less so. Great acts, yes, but not necessarily attributed to the deities.

Is there anything that would *embarrass* Muilenburg were he to appear in our midst today? I have to say, I don't hear it. He might have provided some footnotes, but that's really all I see that lacks! The paper exhorts and exclaims more than we are now prone to do, is less explicit about its methodology, but of failings, that's pretty minor. The methodological obsession we are currently absorbed in did not blossom quite as early as 1939, since historical researches were the key method. He will get to that in his next milestone of 1969.

What did he *not anticipate*? This brings us to a whole new section, which is perhaps valuable beyond the retrospective: What's up today? But before we do that, let me review the signal contribution of James Muilenburg to biblical studies, an address he delivered in 1969 as President of the SBL, in fact in the only year (I think) when it met in Berkeley. So this is a

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[10]In a course I taught on Pentateuch, I (then) required a paper from each student, demonstrating the use of critical tools on a text; one students begged to be able to use the work of John Paul 2, which I resisted. I finally let him proceed and felt gratified when he discovered, to his surprise and near-chagrin, that the papal author was not employing any of the methods being taught in our course. "That's just the point," I tried to say gently.

midway measure of where this man was 30 years after the event we are celebrating.

his 1969 address:[11] When I first received and quickly read Mark Graves's invitation to me to comment on the contribution of James Muilenburg, I assumed it would center on his SBL Presidential address, which is to this day frequently quoted and which remains a crucial turning point in biblical studies. So for those two reasons I will pause over it, since fills fuller the 1939 paper and shows the prescience of this scholar, his courage in saying something a bit unexpected at his SBL presidential address. Still assuming, as would have been generally and firmly held even as late as 1969 (almost 'n' on our clock), that historical reconstruction was the main project, Muilenburg throws a curve. Praising the achievements of historians, virtually all of whom are still German, he adds the score of what form-critics have accomplished, owns that he wishes to be included—so classified as a form critic—in their number. Form-criticism, as you recall, wanted then[12] to uncover and reclaim two things: The precise template into which biblical speakers (prophets, psalmists, and so forth) chose to pour their words, such the form/mold that constrained the utterance; and secondly, the particular historical and sociological circumstances had generated the form/mold. Those are excellent questions. Just short of halfway through the presentation (or in the article that the address became), he begins, gently, to cite some short-comings of form-criticism: 1) In certain instances, the method is followed too rigorously and exclusively, becoming more important than the text; i.e., critics in their zeal maintain instances of pure forms that are not really present; 2) since almost never can scholars really reconstruct the

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[11]James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 89 (1970): 1-18.

[12]It is trying to reinvent itself today somewhat in the direction of his suggestions, though is perhaps a few decades slow to do so. See Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi, eds., *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003).

social circumstances that occasioned the utterance, that part of the method becomes impractical if not also virtually forced to overreach; 3) some of what is present in utterances has to go unremarked in the form-critical method, and these are features that Muilenburg calls psychological (and that we now would classify as literary expressions of something inferrably psychological but available for study only in language[13]), though he also cites the field emerging in classical literary studies, called stylistics or aesthetic criticism and names, in fact, a body of work done on literary features of the biblical text that had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. "What I am interested in, above all, is in understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole. Such an enterprise I should describe as rhetoric and the methodology as rhetorical criticism."[14]

So there it was, clear and concise. He moved beyond that pair of sentences to begin to describe how to do such work, method now lisped by biblical students at the knee of their teachers: Identify the unit, define its edges, name the formal devices, and in dialogue with others doing the same, so that a technical language can emerge; discern the structure of the unit and pay careful attention to the Hebrew poetic strophes, not expecting or exacting uniformity.[15] Earlier,

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[13]Here he cites the pioneering work of Luis Alonso-Schökel, e.g., *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988).

[14]Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 8.

[15]Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," pp. 8-18, as he first tells and then demonstrates how a rhetorical critic might proceed. Pride of place in the endeavor of naming the features has to go do Muilenburg's SFTS student, Jack R. Lundbom, who has produced several works on this topic, notably and most recently, *The Hebrew Prophets: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

between his critique of the old and naming the new (if something so ancient as rhetoric can be called "new"—and we may recall that in the 1939 piece he claimed that "new" was a bit over-invoked—he had said something as important but maybe not quite so clear: Besides looking for what was *the same*, as form critics did, sometimes forcing matters a bit in order to see sameness, he called for critical work that would also point of what was *not the same*. Whether he knew it at the time, this was a vastly freeing enterprise: How do biblical poets articulate variation as well as sameness? What a doorway, and what wonderful rooms lay beyond it in biblical studies.[16] The whole second half of the speech/article is his reading of several poetic texts, and as he moves to conclude, he seems to rejoice in the multiplicity of patterns to be found, speaks (with T.S. Eliot of latitudes not explored as poetry moves to "raid the inarticulate." He concludes: "Finally, it has not been our intent to offer an alternative to form criticism or a substitute for it, but rather to call attention to an approach of eminent lineage which may supplement our form-critical studies. . . . In a word, then, we affirm the necessity of form criticism, but we also lay claim to the legitimacy of what we have called rhetorical criticism. Form criticism and beyond."[17]

Where did this man get all this? Granting still the hegemony of historical studies, some biblical scholars had been testing other winds: Language philosophy generated a whole fresh set of questions and issues, such that "happenedness" was no longer at the center of the stage. There was more to reality, to God, to religion, to biblical study than all of the issues churned up not inappropriately by the "new glasses." It is also fair to say that the hubris and expectations of

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[16]A Muilenburg student, now Dr. Chris Franke (recently retired) told me (e-mail, dated 4/28/2014) that she, learning of and drawn by Muilenburg's interest in literary matters, came to study with him in the 1960s from teaching that she was doing at the San Francisco College for Women. Her work (*Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994]),was also much influenced by his approach.

[17]Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond,"18.

"history as only" and "science as all" was tempered a bit. If we can think of the emergence of language philosophy as another set of new glasses, then we can see that the conversation will change. History and science are not the only reality, and maybe not even the main ones! I think it is fair to say that part of the struggles Islam has with modernity is that it has not taken this whole huge discourse into consideration. It may not ever choose to do so, but to some extent, it will struggle as Judaism and Christianity do when they disregard this whole modern critical experience.

subsequent developments in biblical studies

But to read the article is to note how carefully Muilenburg presents his thinking. He sounds almost like one of the old Bishops of Rome, maintaining in the first person plural that what is being said is not new but is what "we have always taught." And that is in some ways most apt, here, since biblical studies was, in 1969, freshly on the verge of seeing that indeed historical studies were not the only thing to do. I can hear Muilenburg saying as in 1939—but don't *not* do historical things!! And perhaps the field is only quite recently catching up with him there.[18] So let me sketch, again with loping stride, what happened since 1969, since that is almost fifty years ago. Biblical scholars—influenced remotely by language philosophy and more proximately by secular literary theory, notably by New Criticism that (over-) corrected an historical dominance in literature, urging that the historical details cannot be made essential to what the work says and that the intent of the author does not control meaning—emerged in about

[18]For an effort to position the various methodological approaches suitable and clearly, see Barbara Green, "This Old Text: An Analogy for Biblical Interpretation,"*Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006): 72-83.

1980 with some brilliant literary studies of biblical narrative.[19] Eschewing, at least at the start of this fresh turn, to load up their work with historical matters, they turned to explore and demonstrate the workings of the language, rhetoric and its siblings. While doing so, these scholars and others also offered some critique of the work of historians—not least to make evident all that the historians had failed to consider that was clearly relevant, thus contributing to three newish related to (post-)modern historiography: 1) In a word, the few ancients who worried about it and the early moderns who surely did assumed that if history was needed to be known about, then it was simply a matter of uncovering the data, with ever-better tools. History was re-constructible, granted, with a lot of work. This perspective still attends a lot of biblical study and fills many books in the library. The challenge to it is important: Efforts of later people to view or participate in past times is not a matter of simple retrieval. We cannot retrieve or reconstruct the remote past in any direct or simple way. The most we can do is approach it, conscious of and articulate in the various methods and methodologies we employ, to engage it perspectivally. The biblical text is, among other things, radically historical. But that does not exhaust its reality. Historical methods must be brought to bear, but not those alone. And the job of the historical methods is not reducible to figuring out "happenedness" in really any of its iterations. All the best methods in the world will not reduce the text to its facticity. We, investigating historical matters as is wonderful to do, will only see what we are able to grasp from where we stand, and that will be very partial. We begin, inevitably, already steeped in and formed by multiple pre-understandings, and those shape our efforts. We move, slowly and carefully, consciously, to seek

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[19]To name just three, Alonso-Schökel (as above); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); and Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *The Anchor Bible Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975) which inspired my dissertation.

to explain what we are investigating and to understand it, hoping to blend in some aspect its horizons with our own. Our understanding, such as it is, is never *not* about us as well as about what we are seeking to "fuse horizons with."[20] Explanation-Understanding is the process by which we interpret. We do not encounter "free-standing" and positivist history, things as they actually happened, but we approach the past vastly shaped by the several aspects of consciousness we have acquired. We filter everything we investigate through our own sieves, which are many and some scarcely known to us. We know the past only from our present stance, leaning back to try and get some sense of it, but that sense comes vastly filtered. We are never simply re-constructing what once was. It is an ontological and epistemological impossibility. The field of historiography seeks to develop and demonstrate these things. Reception history goes here: How texts have been approached and understood variously by various sets of readers, and why so.

A second useful way to consider the historical issues under consideration is to take a quick look at what is called "new historicism." Some think that title is a boastful claim and that the new much resembles the old, but I think in fact some new perspectives predominate that make a break with the past assumptions.[21] What Habib presents is the thoroughly post-modern conception of this project, the many ways in which it blends philosophy and literary theory and historiography. The point is not necessarily to "get" the whole project but to see how different it is from where we began (and may still be stuck). The summary also makes clear why projects in

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[20]Hans-Georg Gadamer, ""Language and Hermeneutics," from *Truth and Method*, trans, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), reprinted in Jo Carruthers, Mark Knight and Andrew Tate, eds. *Literature and the Bible: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 94-104.

[21]M.A.R. Habib, "New Historicism" in *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory from Plato to the Present* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 2008), 760-776.

historiography are ambitious and need a good deal of "complementary" study if one is seriously to undertake them, serious study with experts in these fields, such as are available. And the third discourse that challenges us here rises from the sciences as well as from history. It is called, variously New Cosmology, Big History, Big Science, Big Religion.[22] I simply want to place it here, as the effort to re-investigate and place everything, "God" included, within the complexity of the whole cosmos. Far more challenging than Darwin, the New Cosmology offers us yet another opportunity to rethink everything from within a new and expanding set of theories. The question is: How might the Bible, or the Bible as Scripture, with its long (but not in cosmological terms!) understanding and reflection of a particular religious experience, contribute? It would be a great field for a young scholar adept in philosophy, science, history and Bible!

What historians have had to swallow, if possible, was the legitimacy of other fields besides the historical and the inevitable corollary of its own challenges to adapt. And what has emerged is a responsible blend of methods that work to establish the historical and social features of a text (setting and/or production) insofar as they can be known (but not farther), works to present and an effort to deal with numerous literary features, so many recognized as possible, now, that choices must be made, with literary theory rendering the work articulate and in dialogue with literature in general. The best and most responsible work done in biblical studies is also claimed existentially by the writer and is respectful of and often solicitous to present the views of other readers and, at least, to recognize the limitations of what can be said from any particular point of entry.

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[22]The thought of the founding religious thinking, collaborating with historians and scientists, is summed up in Thomas Berry's *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

But what about biblical theology, you may be asking, wondering. It is, in many ways, thin on the ground.[23] A prominent and widely-read scholar like John Collins maintains that it is in decline, no longer at the heart of the biblical studies project, seen by many as a specialization and a dubious one at that. Among its problems he cites its struggles to name its project clearly, its addiction to positivism, its confusion about its relation to confessional belief, its general refusal to take on the substantial challenges of discourses such as feminism, post-colonialism, postmodernity in general. At the GTU presently OT theology is taught by one faculty member only, from SFTS, as James Muilenburg might be pleased to note. I consulted Professor Annette Schellenberg for a description of how she would position biblical theology amid biblical studies, and she provided me with information.[24] The course outcomes speak of getting a sense of how the ancients thought on various key topics: creation, the human person, justice; to be studied are metaphors and the polyphony with which the tradition speaks. Good and evil are investigated, and the questions of other gods, the nations. This is not *the* theology of *the* OT, or even of big chunks of tradition (e.g., post-exile). In other words, it is descriptive, recognizes its own limits, sees the unlikelihood of our establishing many certainties. Is it historical? Surely. Systematic? Not especially. Confessional? I doubt it.

But I think, at least here and in fact elsewhere in the US as well, Christian Spirituality has, to some extent, replaced biblical theology as the useful partner field of studies. Again, to summarize or characterize briefly, Christian spirituality (carefully and explicitly rooted in a general secular field as well as in Christian studies) is inevitably interdisciplinary, quite free of

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[23]See John J. Collins, "Bibical Theology between Apologetics and Criticism, " in *Beyond Biblical Theologies*, Heinrich Assel, Stefan Beyerle, and Christfried Böttrich, eds, (Tübingen: Mohn Siebeck, 2012), 223-41.

[24]She provided a syllabus for OT 5330, taught in Fall 2011.

system-ness, eager to claim its own situated position, characterizing itself as descriptive rather than prescriptive, freeing itself from some of the clear short-comings of systematic theology without in any way seeking to be anything other than responsible and self-implicating.[25] Christian spirituality and the subset of biblical spirituality within it, is often described as follows: Christian spirituality is the project and process of re-orientation, at continuous transformation toward relationship that is of fundamental or ultimate importance, in relation, presumably, toward the Trinitarian God and toward other creatures. It looks look like— what? Like who and what God is, compassion, and aims toward what we most want to be and give and receive, compassion. Biblical spirituality is the Bible-as-Scripture's role in that process, how we partner with it and it with us: not our only partner, but a main and important one for Christians. To enter and live in the Bible as Scripture assists transformation, and a practitioner must know how to enter and live within the scripturing process well, skillfully. The field of biblical spirituality is participative and dialogical, deeply relational—throughout. Scripture's job or role is to be fully adequate and in fact, to offer a rich and inexhaustible access to God's self-disclosure, as indeed for 3000 years or so Jews and Christians have affirmed to be the case. That others have done so gets us only so far, encourages us without replacing or obviating our participation in the same affirmation. It can be tempting to omit the Hebrew Scriptures, either consciously or functionally, or to make them simply preludes to Jesus in one way or another; but they can do much more for us than that, and we may do well to remember that for Jesus, those *were* Scripture, and so those mediated his relationship toward God and compassion with other creatures, and pretty well!

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[25]An excellent introduction to this field, pioneered at GTU, is Arthur Holder, ed.,*The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Practitioners need to know enough about the historical/social background of the ancient texts that we can get situated, though without obsessing too much on details; those are helpful but often not the main point, and often we don't know everything we would like; but absent this adequate background, we will simply project, and probably miss much of what is there. So James Muilenburg would be pleased with that, at least.

our last then/now: advice to students

As a concluding piece, let's visualize an advising session in 1939, and in 2014, with a James Muilenburg offering advice to a student. I think it is safe to say that, in 1939, he would have met with his student, who will have arrived for advanced study steeped in theology, of course, and already working assiduously on ancient languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and at least one other relevant one, whether Ugaritic, Akkadian, maybe something enabling Egyptian studies. The modern languages would, of course, start with German and proceed from there. Historical study would be crucial: philology, archeology, source- form- and redaction-critical methods. Time would be no object, and the pale young man sitting in Professor Muilenburg's office would not be worried about student loans, nor would he be under-prepared in English, even if it were not his native tongue.

Today, of course, as the prospective student sits in the office at SFTS perhaps once occupied by James Muilenburg, the professorial chair is occupied by Professor Schellenberg. The student being advised is the widowed mother of two, raising them as a single parent. Her background has been in engineering. How to prepare for her new interest in and engagment with biblical studies? Well, she needs to take a couple of theology courses. Professor Schellenberg scrutinizes her collection of transcripts, hoping for some physics and philosophy but finds none.

She hears the glimmer of interest in literature, and so talks with her about developing that interdisciplinary angle, perhaps with the study of Greco-Roman rhetoric or cognitive linguistics at UCB. The student seems stunned. She has begun Hebrew and Greek and hopes to either test out or pass a semester of advanced course work in Greek with a B+, thus demonstrating that she has had enough of the language, so to speak. Her modern language will be modern Hebrew and perhaps English, since she is an international student. Already overwhelmed by debt, she and the advisor talk over the pros and cons of her taking fewer classes than might be ideally desirable, and the hope is for a campus job, since, lacking a green card, she cannot be employed. Will she know enough history? She will do her best, and as we glance back over our shoulders at all that has come before, the hills and valleys, we know she will do her best and it may be just what is needed!