

What Does Jerusalem Have To Do With South Bend?

By Francis J. Beckwith

Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology, ed. by Eleanore Stump and Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame Press, 1993) 325 pages.

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It is no secret that the insights of philosophy and logic have been for too long ignored by theologians and biblical scholars. Rather than critically analyzing the presuppositions of their critical methods, the methods are assumed as correct since they are the result of "the latest scholarship". They are then used by some, though not all, to take the Bible apart piece by piece. The proponents of this higher criticism have been quite reticent to submit their view to the highest criticism: philosophical analysis. Consider a recent example from contemporary evangelicalism. Murray Harris, a professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, holds a view of Jesus' resurrection which apparently denies that Jesus rose bodily from the grave in the same body that died on the cross. To defend this view, Harris argues in the following way: Because there are passages in the nt that seem to indicate that the resurrected Jesus is immaterial (e.g., Luke 24: 31, 35; John 20: 19; Acts 10:40-41a), because there are others that seem to indicate that the resurrected Jesus is material (e.g., Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:43; John 20:20; Acts 1:4) and because Paul speaks of Jesus having a "spiritual body", therefore Jesus' resurrected "body was customarily 'immaterial' or 'nonfleshly' but was capable of temporary materialization."¹

An important philosophical distinction, however, would prevent Professor Harris from flirting with heresy. That is, a recognition of the distinction between *ontology* (being) and *epistemology* (knowledge) would cover up a multitude of hermeneutical sins. To put it simply, Harris confuses Biblical statements about the *being* of Jesus' resurrected body with Biblical statements about the *knowledge* of the observers of Jesus' resurrected body. For all the "materialistic" passages concern the being of his body, e.g., "Touch me and understand, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39b), while the "nonmaterialist" passages concern the inability of the observers to see

¹ Murray Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 376.

the risen Lord, e.g., “He disappeared from their sight” (Luke 24:31). Some of the materialistic passages Harris cites (and one that is not cited—John 2:19-21) have Jesus saying that he is a resurrected body of flesh and bones. Yet it is interesting to note that Harris does not cite one nonmaterialistic passage in which Jesus says that his body is immaterial. Granted that the nonmaterialistic passages tell us that Jesus' resurrected body is far different from an ordinary physical body (i.e., it is an immortal “spiritual” body), it is a logical *non sequitur* to say from this fact that it follows that Jesus' body is not physical. Moreover, it does not follow from the fact that one cannot be seen by the naked eye that one is essentially immaterial. The stealth bomber cannot be seen by the radar eye, but it does not follow from this that it is essentially immaterial.

The above case is one reason why the book under review is such a ground-breaking work. Edited by Eleanore Stump (Robert J. Henly Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University) and Thomas P. Flint (Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame), it is a collection of papers which stems from the Conference on Philosophical Theology and Biblical Exegesis held at the University of Notre Dame in March, 1990. According to the editors, the conference was conceived because “we thought that the time was ripe for philosophy of religion to pay attention also to another of its correlative disciplines, namely, biblical studies. We supposed that the interdisciplinary work would benefit philosophy of religion and also biblical studies, as has been the case in other interdisciplinary ventures between philosophy and correlative disciplines” (xii-xvi).

The contributors to the conference were liberal and conservative Catholic theologians (including Biblical scholars) and philosophers as well as conservative Protestant theologians (including Biblical scholars) and philosophers. And as one would expect, the results were engaging, and at times tumultuous. Although the editors admit to have omitted from their introduction the spicy details of the more vociferous exchanges (because, in their words, “the details are not particularly edifying” [xv]), the first set of essays (in part i, “Faith and Philosophy: A Challenge to Contemporary Biblical Studies”), by philosopher Michael Dummett (“The Impact Scriptural Studies on the Content of Catholic Belief” and “Response to Collins”) and biblical scholar John J. Collins, provides us with a residue of the fireworks. Dummett's essay is a scorching philosophical analysis of the incorporation of higher critical views of scripture into Catholic biblical scholarship. A sample from Dummett:

The first is the exegetical question whether the Gospels do provide grounds for thinking that Jesus knew that he was God and expressly led his disciples to grasp that he was. I think that there is; but I will not at this point engage the exegetes on their own ground.... Here I will simply say instead that, if they *can* demonstrate that there is not sufficient reason to think this, then the opponents of Christianity can congratulate them for having deprived it of all rational basis, whether as traditionally understood or as understood by exegetical theology. (9)

For the Church cannot say, “Some Catholics hold, and others deny, that the Church has the right to pronounce on what is of the faith”; to say that—or in professedly comprehensive catechism, to say nothing on the matter—would be to renounce the claim. This is an issue that cannot remain unresolved.... And if it is resolved in favor of the pluralists, the Church will thereby be admitting to having long been a fraudulent institution, in which the pluralists will deserve no credit for continuing their membership. (14)

Needless to say, Jones does not turn the other cheek:

Professor Dummett is here as an expert and he cannot so easily excuse his failure to attain even a basic literacy in the subject on which he presumes to pontificate... Professor Dummett does not speak for the Catholic laity but for a small group of reactionary intellectuals.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Professor Dummett's paper is how little he knows, or has bothered to learn, about the profession he has chosen to attack.... Professor Dummett must not be allowed to project onto biblical scholarship the dogmatism of his own mindset... (23-24)

Jones' strong reaction to the “reactionary” Dummett continues throughout Jones' reply. He concludes by placing Jesus firmly in the liberal camp by employing an argument from ignorance, which, to my knowledge, is still a fallacy of informal logic (though, evidently, a staple of contemporary biblical scholarship): “For however garbled the words of Jesus may be in transmission, we are not told that he ever said that diversity of opinion should not be tolerated” (30). Get thee behind me, conservative?

In addition to Part I, this volume contains five other parts. Part II (“Biblical Studies: Knowledge and Morality in Collosians”) contains essays by biblical scholar Wayne A. Meeks (“To Walk Worthily of the Lord: Moral Formation in the Pauline School Exemplified by the Letter to the Collosians” and “Response to Stump”) and Eleanore Stump (“Moral Authority and Pseudonymity: Comments on the Paper of Wayne A. Meeks”).

Part III, “Philosophy and Biblical Studies on the Empty Tomb”, consists of four contributors and five essays: Stephen T. Davis (“Was the Tomb Empty?”), Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (“The Heart of the Gospel: Comments of the Paper of Stephen T. Davis”), Adela Yabro Collins (“The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark” and “Response to Kretzmann”), and Norman Kretzmann (“Resurrection Resurrected: Comments on the Paper of Adela Yabro Collins”). The essays in this section are particularly good, especially Davis' defense of the historicity of the empty tomb as well as Plantinga's sympathetic reply.

In Part IV (“Faith and Philosophy: A Reaction to Contemporary Biblical Studies”) the

central focus is the relationship of New Testament critical studies to the ordinary user of the New Testament. In his essay (“Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the new Testament”), Peter van Inwagen, a philosopher, maintains that clergyman, ordinary churchgoers and theologians who consider the New Testament divinely inspired need not take into account the results of biblical criticism which does not recognize the text as divinely inspired. He also contends that even though the nt may not be perfect (or inerrant) this does not mean it is not historically reliable and a sufficient ground for religious faith. In his commentary on van Inwagen's essay (“Critical Studies of the New Testament: Comments on the Paper of Peter van Inwagen”), biblical studies scholar Ronald J. Feenstra argues that although he is in general sympathetic to van Inwagen's position in regard to ordinary churchgoers and pastors, he does not think it applies to theologians for there is a lot that theologians can learn from critical studies.

Miracles and Christology are the focus of Part V (“Biblical Studies and Philosophy on Christology”), Richard Swinburne (“Interpreting the New Testament: Comments on the Paper of Harold W. Attridge”), Marilyn McCord Adams (“The Role of Miracles in the Structure of Luke-Acts”), and Thomas H. Tobin, S.J. (“Miracles, Magic, and Modernity: Comments on the Paper of Marilyn McCord Adams”). Although the essays by Adams and Tobin were technically impressive and quite informative, the essays by Attridge and Swinburne seem to be much closer to what this reviewer envisions ought to be the rôle of philosophy in Biblical Studies. Attridge maintains that the nt provides us with many different Christologies, indicating that there is not one nt view of Jesus as Christ. Swinburne, on the other hand, makes some important philosophical and logical distinctions, as well as recognizing the rôle of philosophical presuppositions in one's hermeneutic, in order to support a more traditional approach to nt Christology, which sees the Church's doctrinal tradition as an integral part of properly interpreting the NT.

This volume concludes in Part VI (“Overview of Biblical Studies”) with two essays, one by John R. Donahue, S.J. (“Between Jerusalem and Athens: The Changing Shape of Catholic Biblical Scholarship”) and another by Bas C. van Fraassen (“Three-sided Scholarship: Comments on the Paper of John R. Donhue, S.J.”). Donahue's essay is a clearly-written history of the relationship between Catholic biblical scholarship and contemporary biblical criticism. Van Fraassen's piece is much more than merely a commentary on Donahue's essay. It is a philosophical reflection on the relationship between contemporary Biblical scholarship and Christian faith, making reference to other essays in this volume.

The editors admit that this volume, as well as the conference from which it is derived, is merely the beginning of a dialogue between biblical scholars and philosophers of religion. The University of Notre Dame, the editors of this book, as well as the many scholars behind the scenes ought to be commended for initiating this long-overdue interdisciplinary project. I would have liked to have seen certain issues discussed in this volume (e.g., biblical exegesis and the concept of God, incarnational theology and philosophical coherence) as well as an essay or two by conservative biblical scholars from the evangelical wing of Protestantism, and perhaps these will occur in future

conferences and books which will result from this new interdisciplinary enterprise. Nevertheless, *Hermes and Athena* is an excellent work which I highly recommend.