

Book Review

Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Prometheus Books, 2007)

by James D. Price

“Hector Avalos is associate professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University, the author or editor of six books on biblical studies and religion, the former editor of the *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion*, and the executive director of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion.”¹ He grew up in a Pentecostal Protestant home and became a child evangelist, but abandoned his faith early in life for atheism. Upon graduation with a degree in anthropology from the University of Arizona (1982) he entered Harvard University where he earned a Master of Theological Studies (1985) and a PhD in Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Philology (1991).²

The book has 399 pages, including an index of authors and subjects, an index of Scripture references, an extensive 36-page bibliography with approximately 800 entries, an appendix providing a brief guide to the ten English Bible translations referenced in the book. There are a few typographical errors to be noted: “exstablishment” (p. 26); “King Josi’ah” (p. 126); “*dwd*” (p. 129, should be “*byt*”); “Euphra’tes” (p. 130); “Megid’do (p. 131); “Beth-hor’on” (p. 131); “slide” (p. 157, should be “side”); “Matthew 28:57-61” (p. 193, should be 27:57-61); “history or [!] religion” (page 235, should be “of”); “fine” (p. 249, should be “find”); “audiencs” (p. 310).

The purpose of the book is a “plea to end biblical studies as we know it with two main premises:

1. Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Bible is the product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of our world are no longer held to be relevant, even by most Christians and Jews.
2. Paradoxically, despite the recognition of such irrelevance, the profession of academic biblical studies still centers on maintaining the illusion of relevance.”³

He defines irrelevant as: “a biblical concept or practice that is no longer viewed as valuable, applicable, and/or ethical.”⁴ He argues that “there is really nothing in the entire book Christians call ‘the Bible’ that is any more relevant than anything else written in the ancient world.”⁵ This is a rather self-contradictory plea. How can anyone determine the relevance of the Bible without first

¹Quotation is from the book’s jacket.

² Page 26.

³ Page 16.

⁴ Page 17.

⁵ Page.22.

studying it for himself? Avalos hopes to persuade his readers to accept his thesis, but his arguments are unconvincing, being based on faulty reasoning and methodology.

However, an additional purpose of the book, not included in his stated thesis, is his evangelistic zeal to convert the reader, not to Christian faith, but to his new faith—an atheistic secular humanism. He stated that his view of biblical studies

“is a frank secular humanist view of biblical studies. And rather than pretend I am not hegemonic, I hold that (1) all worldviews, even those that claim pluralism, are hegemonic because they inevitably seek power over those that have a nonpluralistic worldview, and (2) a pluralistic religious hegemony is a politically expedient means to persuade people to adopt a secular humanist hegemony, which I believe holds the best prospect for a better global society. Phrased more frankly, religious pluralism is good so long as it does not interfere with secular humanism’s goals.”⁶

One may wonder about the ethics of seeking power over others, of political expedience, and of prohibiting the religious freedom of others for the benefit of a preferred worldview—a worldview with a long history of failure.

His ultimate goal is that “one day, the Bible might even be viewed as one of the curiosities of a tragic bibliolatrous age, when dependence on a text brought untold misery and stood as an obstacle to human progress.”⁷ The use of these derogatory terms, of course, is unbecoming to a gentleman and scholar, but is a clear expression of his extreme prejudice against Christianity and Judaism. How can the reader expect an unbiased evaluation of the evidence with such open hostility of the author against the subject matter?

The book contains an introduction and ten chapters, being divided into two parts. Part One contains an introduction and six chapters, each dedicated to demonstrating the irrelevance of a particular scholarly discipline as it relates to biblical studies: Bible Translation, Textual Criticism, History and Archaeology, the Historical Jesus, Literary Criticism, and Biblical Theology. Part Two contains four chapters, each dedicated to demonstrating how “the profession maintains its relevance despite the findings of its subdisciplines”:⁸ the Religious Academia, the Society of Biblical Literature, the Media-Publishing Complex, and a Conclusion. This review addresses each chapter with respect to the evidence provided, the author’s methodology, and the validity of his conclusions.

⁶Page 26.

⁷ Page 29.

⁸ Page 28.

Chapter 1: Translations: Hiding in Plain Sense

Unfortunately, though the author may regard this chapter heading as humorous, it is really another expression of prejudice. While he does allude to translations of a few biblical passages he regards as “hiding” the sense, this not the main topic of the chapter. Sadly, every chapter heading is tainted with this type of prejudicial folly.

The chapter begins with a discussion of translation theory (pp. 37-42) in which he criticizes modern theories and translations for not being word-for-word literal, or for adjusting the vocabulary and grammar of the translation to the literary proficiency and the cultural context of the target readership. He stated: “But even if we grant that ‘dynamic/functional equivalence is better than ‘formal equivalence,’ the fact remains that ‘functional’ equivalence represents the continuing effort to maintain the value of biblical texts by distorting, minimizing, or erasing original meanings that modern cultures would find objectionable.”⁹ Being a member of the translation profession myself,¹⁰ I find it very difficult to understand how a multilingual person like Avalos cannot understand the practical reasons why translators must do what they do. After all, a translation is of no value unless readers can correctly understand it; only then would he be able to assess its relevance.

Politically Correct Polytheism

Next Avalos accuses translators of mistranslating polytheistic passages as monotheistic (pp. 43-44). He addressed the names of God in Deuteronomy 32:8-10, claiming that the name Most High (Elyon) should be understood as the name of a pagan deity because it is found as such in ancient Semitic literature. While it is true that *Elyon* is the name of a pagan deity in some ancient Semitic literature, it is not necessarily true for ancient Israel; it is fallacious to assume cultural and linguistic equality among ancient independent Semitic nations. With his academic training, Avalos must surely know that, while similar, the culture, religion, and language of each ancient Semitic nation were different. The meaning of a Hebrew word depends on its usage in the Hebrew language and culture, not on its use (if it is even found) in Phoenician, Ugaritic, Eblaite, Moabite, or Babylonian. In Hebrew literature, the name *Elyon* occurs as one of the alternate names of the God of Israel, usually in poetry in parallel with one of the alternates.¹¹ Fur-

⁹ Page 42.

¹⁰ Executive Editor and Chairman of the Executive Review Committee of the *New King James Version* Old Testament, a translator and a section editor of the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, and author of *A Theory of Bible Translation: An Optimal Equivalence Model* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

thermore, in the times of Israel's history when they were worshipping pagan gods, *Elyon* was not among them. It is true that the Dead Sea Scrolls have an alternate reading "sons of God," and the Greek Septuagint reads "angels of God" in place of the phrase "sons of Israel." But even if the correct reading were "God" rather than "Israel," there is no compelling reason to imagine evidence of polytheism here. To do so would completely ignore the context. The passage (32:1-43) is a poem attributed to Moses (31:30) in which he condemns polytheism and Israel's idolatry; for Moses to acknowledge polytheism in verse 8 would contradict the rest of the poem, and indeed his own theology. Avalos' prejudice seems to overshadow his scholarship here.

Creating Mistranslation

On pages 44 through 46, Avalos criticizes modern translations of the account of creation (Genesis 1:1-3), evidently regarding them to be too word-for-word literal. Instead he said: "Verses 1-3 form a single sentence that could more literally be translated as follows:

When Elohim began to shape the heavens and the dry land—the dry land being then formless and empty, and darkness on the face of the waters, and the breath of Elohim blowing over the waters— Elohim said: "Let there be light."

However, such a translation is far from literal; instead it is interpretive paraphrase—the kind of translation he condemned in pages 37-42. It adds words (*when* and *began*), alters the meaning of words (*shape* instead of *create*; *dry land* instead of *earth*; *breath* instead of *Spirit*; *blowing* instead of *hovering*), and alters the tense/aspect of the verbs, creating one complex sentence from five simple ones linked by conjunctions. That's what should be rightly called "creating mistranslations."

On pages 46 through 47, Avalos rightly criticizes some translators for trying to harmonize the chronology of chapters one and two of Genesis, supposing that the chapters are two chronologically contradictory accounts of creation. Of course, that is one possible reading of the two chapters: chapter one is the account of the creative acts of six explicitly successive days, whereas chapter two is composed as narrative using Waw consecutive conjunctions linking imperfect verbal forms, which grammatical structure usually, but not exclusively, expresses temporal sequence. However, this grammatical construction is also characteristic of descriptive literature (cf. Exod. 36:8-40:33), descriptive lists (cf. Num. 1:1-3:4), and expository prose (cf. Deut. 27:11-26; 29:1-29), as well as other literary types.¹² In these literary types, the Waw consecutive with im-

¹¹With *El* (Gen. 14:18, 19, 20, 22; Num. 24:16; Psa. 73:11; 77:10-11; 78:17-18, 35; 107:11; Isa. 14:13-14); with *Shaddai* (Num. 24:16; Psa. 91:1); with *Yahweh* (2 Sam. 22:14; Psa. 7:18; 9:2-3; 18:14; 21:8; 47:3; 83:19; 87:5-6; 91:9; 92:1; 97:9); with *Elohim* (Psa. 46:5; 50:14; 56:3; 78:56)

perfect infers no necessary temporal sequence, but may rather just introduce the next topic. For example, Exodus 37:1-9 describes the construction of the ark of the covenant, where the sequence of sentences is clearly topical, not necessarily chronological. The literary structure of Genesis 2:4-25 is much like that of Exodus 37:1-9, and so may be considered descriptive, not necessarily chronological. Genesis 1:1 through 2:3 has the temporally sequential terms *first day*, *second day*, . . . *seventh day*; whereas in 2:4-25, except for the word *before* in verse 5 twice, there are no temporal or sequential terms. So, one may rightly understand chapter 2:4-25 to be topical and not sequential. Again Avalos has failed to consider context. It is very unlikely that the composer of this record of creation would include accounts that he knew his readers would regard as contradictory, but it makes good sense if he knew they would regard them as complementary.

Numerous Mistranslations

On pages 47 through 49, Avalos discusses alleged mistranslations at 2 Chronicles 36:9 and 1 Samuel 17:49-51. There some translators resolved contradictions with parallel passages, while others left the contradictions stand. What Avalos failed to tell his readers is that those translators who resolved the contradiction by altering the wording of the translation acknowledged the alteration by means of a marginal note; whereas those who left contradiction stand acknowledged the contradiction by means of a marginal note.¹³ The problem of these passages is not that of translation but of textual variation and should be discussed in chapter two, not here. The examples are neither numerous nor mistranslations.

Dehumanizing Humanism

On pages 49 and 50, Avalos accuses some translations of Ecclesiastes 2:25 of shifting the source of enjoyment from humanity to God. He argued: “For some, the author of Ecclesiastes expresses a very humanistic idea insofar as he thinks that one should pursue one’s happiness for the sake of oneself, not for some god.”¹⁴ Translations either render this passage as “For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?” (NKJ) or as “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” (NAS). He asserted, however, that “a good English rendition would be: ‘For who will eat and enjoy, except for myself.’” Unfortunately, he failed to cite anyone who

¹² See my *A Theory for Bible Translation: An Optimal Equivalence Model* (Edwin Mellen, 2007), Appendix E; also my *An Exegetical and Expository Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (e-book http://jamesdprice.com/images/30-Whole_Text_with_TOC.pdf, 20).

¹³ Marginal notes are found in the scholarly edition of a translation but not necessarily in inexpensive editions. Avalos is obligated to consult a scholarly edition of a translation if he intends to criticize it.

¹⁴ Page 49.

agrees with his peculiar switch from third person to first person reflexive, which frankly makes little sense. Actually, again the problem here is a textual, not a translation, issue. The textual debate is over whether the pronoun of interest is “I” (the Masoretic Text) or “Him” (the reading of most other textual sources), and whether the preposition of interest should be understood as “without” or “more than” (it rarely, if ever, means “for”). Avalos wants his “theology” to determine the answer.

Sugarcoating Jesus

On pages 50 through 53, Avalos accuses some translators of “using mistranslations to hide or suppress some of the starker discontinuities between what Jesus taught and what current versions of Christianity want their audiences to think Jesus taught.”¹⁵ As an example he used Luke 14:25-26 where he claimed “Jesus acts more like a cult leader who actively attempts to transfer allegiance from the believer’s family to himself. Disciples must hate their parents. This, of course, contradicts the commandment to honor one’s parents (Exodus 20:12).”¹⁶ This also contradicts Luke 18:20 as well as Matthew 15:4, 19:19, and Mark 7:10, 10:19 in which Jesus taught His disciples to honor their parents. I don’t know why Avalos needed to cite only the Old Testament; Jesus spoke this commandment often. In addition, Jesus commanded His disciples to love one another (John 13:34), their neighbors (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31), and even their enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35; 10:27). So, unless someone supposes Jesus ignorantly contradicted Himself, there must be some logical explanation for the apparent contradiction here.

There is, of course, an explanation—conveniently ignored again by Avalos—the *context*. In Luke 14:25-33, Jesus warned potential followers of the tremendous cost of becoming His disciple: it involves (1) possible martyrdom on a cross (vs. 27), (2) possible disgrace for failure to finish (vss. 28-30), and (3) possible inability to defeat the enemy (vss. 31-32). In order to convey the seriousness of the commitment to discipleship, Jesus used an everyday rhetorical figure of speech known as *hyperbole* (exaggeration) to make His point: a commitment to discipleship supersedes all other commitments because of the terrible potential consequences. Translators are always faced with a dilemma when it comes to figures of speech: will their readers understand a literal rendering of the figure of speech, or should it be interpreted? In the case of Luke 14:25-26, some translators judged that their target readership would understand the hyperbole, whereas others judged that their target readership would need an interpretation. In either case, the transla-

¹⁵Page 50.

¹⁶ Page 50.

tors were not hiding anything or sugarcoating—they were making the message understandable to their readers. Either Avalos doesn't understand the scholarly discipline of linguistics, or he is propagandizing. The same may be said of the other examples he offered

Engendering Inclusivity

On pages 53 through 56, Avalos criticizes some translators for making their translation more relevant by altering *male* references to *gender-inclusive* references when the context infers such. He stated: “All gender-inclusive translations, therefore, aim not to expose the original culture of ancient authors but to hide it and render it palatable to modern culture.”¹⁷ But Avalos seems to confuse culture with literature. Translations are not intended to expose culture but to render an ancient message into its equivalent in a modern language. The problem is a language issue, not a cultural one. In Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and even Modern Standard English, words like *man*, when used collectively, may be understood to include women and possibly even children, depending on context. Up until the last half of the twentieth century, all English translations followed that convention because readers understood it. It wasn't until the birth of modern feminism and political correctness that gender-inclusiveness became an issue—an exercise in folly because the words in context are not ambiguous. However, even though I disagree with the need for gender-inclusive translations, the translators merely made gender-inclusive expressions explicit where the ancient texts had them implicit by common understanding. No hiding was involved but rather exposing what some readers may think was hidden.

Sanitizing Anti-Judaism

On pages 56 through 58, Avalos criticizes some translations of hiding anti-Judaism in the New Testament. He stated: One of the methods used to atone for a long history of anti-Judaism centers on hiding the anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament.”¹⁸ Again: “We need to repudiate the use of the Bible itself as any sort of authority for our behavior toward any group in the modern world.”¹⁹ I agree that the Bible should never be used to justify hatred and hostility toward any people, and I repudiate its use to justify anti-Jewish behavior throughout history. But Avalos provided no statement in the New Testament espousing hatred or hostility toward Jews. That's because such statements do not exist. Instead he discusses passages recording where some Jewish leaders plotted to have Jesus or an apostle or a disciple killed, as though records of such

¹⁷ Page 56.

¹⁸ Page 56.

¹⁹ Page 58.

factual history justify anti-Judaism. But this conclusion contradicts Jesus' words: "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44 NKJ; see also Luke 6:27, 35). Avalos has committed the false cause-and-effect logical fallacy. The New Testament does not command or condone anti-Jewish behavior; it is the factual *history* recorded in the New Testament that provides an excuse for people with anti-Jewish prejudice to act with hatred and hostility toward Jews, contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. A non-prejudicial reading of the New Testament does no support anti-Jewish behavior.

Summary

On page 58, Avalos summarized his accusations: "Similarly, each individual translation functions as a Disneyland, hiding the fact that all biblical translations are illusions constructed by translators." Again: "The difference between 'formal equivalence' and 'dynamic/functional equivalence' proves inconsequential because the function of both approaches is the same: to prop up the Bible's illusory relevance. Mistranslation is, in this sense, often the goal of all biblical translation." However, this universal accusation is not supported by his own statements and illustrations. The purpose of Bible translation is not *relevance* but *understand* the message; readers judge relevance on the basis of their understanding of the message. Avalos seems to not understand the scholarly discipline of linguistics and its subdiscipline translation. He seems unaware that the meaning of a word is consistent with its literary context. Likewise, he seems not to understand literary and rhetorical figures of speech. Otherwise, his prejudice is shaping his scholarship, and he is propagandizing.

Chapter 2: Textual Criticism: "The Original Sin"

In this chapter, Avalos claims to demonstrate "that (1) the findings of textual criticism devastate any claim that the Bible has been transmitted faithfully from an original text; (2) the whole idea of an original text is an illusion; (3) academic textual critics are still largely religionist in their goals; and (4) there is no longer any strong rational for why textual criticism, as a discipline, should matter to those outside communities of faith, or even to communities of faith themselves. In short, the subdiscipline of textual criticism has helped to put itself and biblical studies out of business."²⁰ Like the first chapter, this one too has a prejudiced heading followed by the unbecoming derogatory term "religionist."

²⁰ Page 66.

Theological Origins

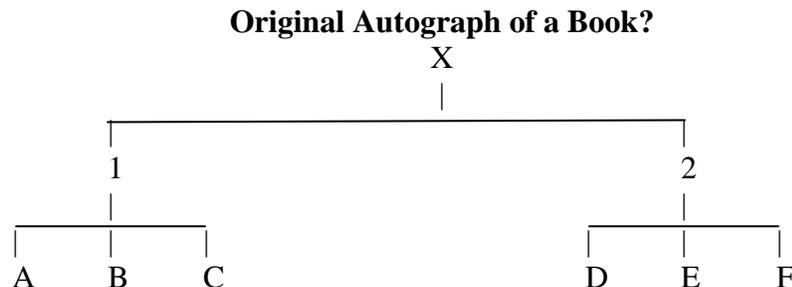
On pages 66 through 67, Avalos claimed that the expectation of original autographic texts for the Bible originated from theological statements in the Bible itself, as though such expectation was uncommon to textual criticism as applied to ancient secular literature in general. Actually, the intuitive initial approach to the text of any ancient document is the expectation that an original autographic text existed. It is only after a thorough study of the surviving copies of an ancient text that one may come to the conclusion that there were multiple redactions or revisions of the text throughout its history. But even if only the texts of the revisions may be recoverable, it is illogical to conclude that an original document never existed. It is the text of the autographic document that may be uncertain, but that the document itself once existed is not uncertain. Who would deny that one dusty dry finger bone witnesses to the former existence of an entire ancient person? Some textual critics deny that the autographic texts of the Bible are recoverable, but that denial can be traced their theological assumptions.

The Illusion of “The Original”

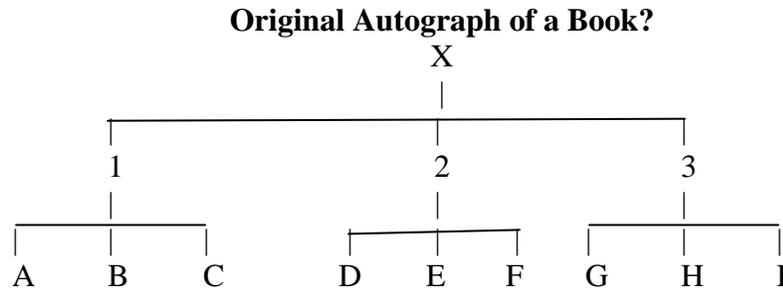
On pages 68 through 69, Avalos claimed that the quest for the original texts of the Bible is illusionary. He stated: “From the beginning the quest for the ‘original’ text has functioned as a sort of Holy Grail for textual critics. Although many Jews and Christians were aware of changes in their scriptures, they thought it was always possible to access the original text.” Again: “For hundreds of years, major academic textual critics . . . supported this illusion even in light of new discoveries.” While Avalos provided quotations from prominent scholars of differing opinions on this issue, the fact that there are differing views does not constitute substantiation of illusion. His claim is unjustified.

Why We Can’t Recover “The Original”

On pages 69 through 72, Avalos attempted to prove why recovering of an original text is impossible. To do so he provided a hypothetical genealogical history of an original text X, as follows:



Where X is the autograph and the antigraph of independent copies 1 and 2; and copy 1 is the antigraph of copies A, B, and C; and copy 2 is the antigraph of copies D, E, and F. Avalos correctly concluded that in this case the readings of autograph X are ambiguous wherever copies 1 and 2 differ because there is no consensus. However, this illustration is unrealistic because Old Testament textual scholars usually agree that there are at least three ancient text traditions; and New Testament textual scholars usually agree on three or four. Consequently, a more realistic hypothetical genealogical history of an original text X would be as follows:



Where X is the autograph and the antigraph of independent copies 1, 2, and 3; and copy 1 is the antigraph of copies A, B, and C; and copy 2 is the antigraph of copies D, E, and F; and copy 3 is the antigraph of copies G, H, and I. In this case, copies 2 and 3 will have the autographic reading where copy 1 has a non-autographic reading; copies 1 and 3 will have the autographic reading where copy 2 has a non-autographic reading; and copies 1 and 2 will have the autographic reading where copy 3 has a non-autographic reading. In this example, there will always be a consensus of two to one for the autographic reading; so theoretically, at least, based on this model, the autographic text may be recoverable. Of course, this is an oversimplified representation of the real situation. But it shows that Avalos deliberately chose an ambiguous example to prove his point. I say deliberately because he must know better. Otherwise, he is poorly informed in the methodology of the scholarly discipline of textual criticism, and is incompetent to criticize it.

Avalos and his companion critics of textual criticism base the uncertainty of recovering the autographic text on the number of variant readings and on the uncertainty of a reading being original. On that basis the task may seem unlikely. But most variants are trivial, having no significant effect on translation. In addition, the probability of recovering the autographic text depends on the certainty of recovering every word of a text, not just the reading where variants occur. For example, the text of the book of Matthew contains 18,769 words by actual computer count.²¹ On the other hand, the Nestle-Aland 28th edition of the Greek New Testament catalogues 1,248 places in Matthew where variant readings occur that could affect translation. That is, the manuscripts

²¹ Based on Scrivener's edition as counted by *BibleWorks* computer software.

have no significant variation in 17,521 places of the 18,769 places in the text of Matthew where variation could occur. That means that, for all practical purposes, 93.4 percent of the text is recoverable with little or no uncertainty. What sensible person would deny that there is an antigraph that accounts for over 93.4 percent of the text? As for the 6.6 percent of the text where variant readings occur, my own research indicates that of the 1,248 places where variant readings occur, among the ancient independent text traditions 582 places had 100 percent consensus on a reading, 797 places had greater than 66 percent consensus on a reading, leaving only 49 places where there was no consensus on a reading.²² That means that, for all practical purposes, 99.7 percent of the text of Matthew is recoverable with some degree of certainty.

The Masoretic Text

On pages 72 through 74, Avalos criticized most scholars for preferring the Masoretic Text, as contained in the Leningrad Codex. He stated: “The Leningrad Codex is an object of such great admiration that enormous labor was exerted to publish a sumptuous edition, called *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, by the renowned scholar Aron Dotan.”²³ Evidently Avalos doesn’t know that Dotan’s edition is not the critical edition used by textual scholars. The Masoretic Text used by scholars is found in the main body of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, edited by W. Rudolph and K. Elliger, the only easily available scholarly printed edition of the Hebrew Bible. It is a diplomatic edition with the text of the Leningrad Codex—the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible—in the main body, with a critical apparatus at the bottom of the pages along with copious Masoretic notes. It is the only complete critical edition of the Hebrew Bible.²⁴ Scholars usually prefer the readings of the Masoretic Text because it satisfies the criteria of the accepted canons of textual criticism; scholars depart from the readings of the Masoretic Text when an alternate reading better satisfies the canons. Avalos seems to be unfamiliar with resources used by textual scholars.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

On pages 74 through 77, Avalos discussed the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), pointing out that the scrolls witness to multiple text traditions in the centuries just prior to and after Christ. He concluded: “the DSS reveal that there was no such thing as ‘the Bible’ (or ‘the

²² http://jamesdprice.com/images/21_Master_copy_with_index_and_TOC.pdf

²³ Page 74.

²⁴ *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* has a fuller textual apparatus, but is incomplete, being available in fascicles for some books; the Hebrew University Hebrew Bible is also a critical edition but incomplete.

Old Testament’) in pre-Christian times, if that meant a single unified and unchanging text.”²⁵ However, the existence of multiple text traditions was not a new discovery; long before the discovery of the DSS, scholars knew that there were at least three independent traditions: (1) the Hebrew text that underlies the third century BC Greek Septuagint, (2) the text that underlies the Samaritan Pentateuch, and (3) the pre-Masoretic text that underlies the Masoretic text and the ninth century manuscript fragments found in the Cairo Genizah. Multiple text traditions do not disprove the existence of a single autographic text; they bear witness to a prior history in which the traditions developed independently from a single source.

Is There a Final Form of a Text?

On pages 77 through 80, Avalos argued that the presence of differing text traditions (along with higher criticism) has caused some scholars to abandon the concept of an original autographic text for the notion of a canonical text—a final form. Of course, higher criticism has its own set of problems and is being replaced by other forms of literary analysis. So the complications it introduces should be set aside.

On pages 78-79, Avalos provided what he claimed is an instance of Jesus misquoting Scripture:

in Matthew 5:31, the Greek reads: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, I give her a certificate of divorce.’” (. . . *δὲ ἄρα αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον*). Jesus, in fact, is quoting from the Greek version of Deuteronomy 24:1, which also has “I give her. . . .” However, the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 24:1 actually says (RSV): “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce.” . . . Therefore Jesus’ quote in Matthew 5:31 changes the subject of the verb completely.

Unfortunately, Avalos is mistaken in several significant points: (1) Jesus was not quoting Deuteronomy but Jewish oral tradition as Avalos’ own citation makes clear; Jesus introduced scriptural quotations with the words “it is written” and quotations of oral tradition with the words “you have heard it said” or “it has been said”; (2) the section of Deuteronomy 24:1 corresponding to “I give her” is not in his citation; it should include “and puts it in her hand”; (3) the phrase he cited does not occur, as he claimed, in the LXX text (*καὶ γράψει αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσει εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς*); and (4) it would be excusable for a novice to mistake the grammatical form of the word *δὲ ἄρα* as first person (I) because it may seem so at first glance, but it is not excusable for a person with Avalos’ academic credentials—the form is actually third person singular imperative (let him), as in the RSV and all other translations. So Jesus changed nothing, but Avalos is guilty of faulty, erroneous scholarship, as it seems often so elsewhere.

²⁵ Page 77.

Religionism and the Dead Sea Scrolls

On pages 80 through 83, Avalos argued that religionism hindered the progress of the scholarly study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He could not resist the use of the derogatory term “religionism” by which he seems to imply some faulty scholarly bias. It is true that the scholars who were originally assigned to study the scrolls were guilty of procrastinating the completion of their assignments. But it is doubtful that the delay was because of their religious persuasions; both Christian and Jewish scholars were involved. It is also true that after the tasks were re-assigned, the studies were completed more promptly, and that more Jewish than Christian scholars participated. But again the prompt completion is not likely because of the religious persuasion of the participating scholars, but because of the pressure from the broader scholarly community headed up by Hershel Shanks.

The New Testament

Beginning on page 83 and continuing to the end of the chapter (page 101), Avalos argued that textual criticism of the New Testament renders biblical studies irrelevant. However, on pages 83 through 85, he argued correctly that the recovery of a valid text does not guarantee valid history. He stated: “One cannot equate the validity of a historical claim with the state of preservation of a report of that historical claim.”²⁶ But that statement relates to the history, the subject matter of Chapter 3, not to the subject matter of this chapter, textual criticism. A valid text must be on hand before one can evaluate any historical statements in the text. So I limit the discussion to textual criticism.

The Textus Receptus

On pages 85 through 87, Avalos argued that printed editions of the Greek New Testament are not based on a single manuscript, as is the case for the Old Testament, but on multiple textual sources. He asserted: “Most readers do not realize that the translations of the New Testament are based on a composite and hypothetical text, not on an actual manuscript.”²⁷ This fact, of course, is because printed editions of the Greek New Testament are based on a reconstruction of the text by means of the methods of the scholarly discipline of textual criticism. In such cases, the reconstructed text is placed in the main body of a page and the textual apparatus is placed at the bottom of the page; this page layout differs from the diplomatic layout used for the Old Testament, where the text of the most preferred manuscript is placed in the main body of a page, and the tex-

²⁶ Page 85.

²⁷ Page 85.

tual apparatus is at the bottom. The practice of textual criticism is essentially the same whether the page layout is the diplomatic or the critical layout.

In the early history of the printed editions of the Greek New Testament, the various editions were based on the relatively few available manuscripts and on a primitive methodology. The early editions that became accepted as standard—the 1550 edition of Stephanus in England, and the 1633 edition of Elzevar on the continent—became known as the *Textus Receptus*, a Latin term meaning “the received text.” Translations of the New Testament were based on these standard texts until the scholarly discipline of textual criticism acquired a degree of consensus among scholars. Avalos’ criticism of this history is unjustified because every scholarly discipline has a history of an intuitive beginning with a progressive development over time to a relatively mature methodology.

The Textus Receptus Overthrown?

On pages 87 through 89, Avalos correctly described the progress of textual criticism as the number of known collated manuscripts increased and the number of textual critical theories expanded, together with the resultant debates that ensued. The result was that most translators²⁸ shifted from the use of the *Textus Receptus* to the use of critical editions of the text. Concerning the manuscripts, he inferred a lack of their validity because of uncertain provenance. He stated: “As with most manuscripts, their provenance can be a problem. . . . In short, we have a lot of texts whose origins are unclear.” While provenance is important for classifying a manuscript, it is relatively insignificant in the practice of textual criticism; the important factors of a manuscript are its date and text.

The Nestle-Aland/UBS Editions

On pages 89 through 91, Avalos describes the historical development of critical editions of the Greek New Testament from the time of the editions of Westcott and Hort to the time of the latest edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, criticizing the academic discipline for lack of progress. He began with a complaint: “We have claimed repeatedly that academic scholars can be just as religionist as the so-called fundamentalist scholars.”²⁹ Yes! Repeated unbecoming derogatory rhetoric. He further stated: “Despite all these editions, there has been little progress beyond what Westcott and Hort did.”³⁰ But his measure of progress was based on the num-

²⁸ The most significant exception is the New King James Version (NKJV) which is not really a new translation but a revision of King James Version into Modern Standard English with corrections where justified.

²⁹ Page 89.

ber of differences there are between the Westcott-Hort text and the Nestle-Aland text, falsely assuming that a small number of differences means little progress. Actually, the small number of differences is better understood as an indication that the probability of an uncertain restored text is diminishing. The greater progress is in the increased number of accessible collated manuscripts, in the improved methodology, and available technological assistance.

Arbitrary Methods

On pages 91 through 95, Avalos criticizes the methodology of textual criticism, namely that of the editors of the Nestle-Aland/UBS text were often arbitrary. He asserted: “In general, criteria for finding the best or earliest reading are classed as internal and external criteria. Internal criteria look at the texts themselves to see what in them would explain the changes in a text (e.g., a spelling mistake). External criteria look at the context outside of the manuscript in question to explain changes in a text (e.g., theological beliefs).”³¹ Actually, he got things backwards. According to Bruce M. Metzger,³² an acknowledged expert in textual criticism, *internal* evidence involves two kinds of probabilities (1) Transcriptional Probabilities that deal with paleographical details and the habits of scribes, and (2) Intrinsic Probabilities that deal what the author was more likely to have written. *External* evidence involves (1) the date of the witness, (2) the geographical distribution of the witness, and (3) the genealogical relationship of texts and families of witnesses.

Avalos also explained: “Currently, the dominant method for deciding what is the best reading is called the ‘eclectic method.’ It is so named because it is not really a single method but rather a sort of ‘pick-and-choose’ method that depends on the situation, as the textual critic sees it.”³³ Again Avalos has misunderstood or misrepresented the term “eclectic method.” According to Metzger:

In recent times, the method has been more frequently called “thoroughgoing eclecticism,” to differentiate it from the most common method of textual criticism (“reasoned eclecticism”), which chooses the best reading by giving weight to both external and internal evidence. Thoroughgoing eclecticism, however, gives almost exclusive consideration to the style of the author and the demands of the context.

³⁰ Page 90.

³¹ Pages 91-92.

³² Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd enlarged edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 209-10.

³³ Page 92.

It would be excusable for a novice to make such glaring mistakes, because it may intuitively seem so on casual reading; but it is inexcusable for a person with the academic credentials of Avalos. Again he is guilty of faulty, erroneous scholarship, as it seems often so elsewhere.

Are Central Teachings Affected?

On pages 95 through 100, Avalos attempts to refute the common claim that textual variations do not affect the central teachings of Christianity. He stated: “Historically, the supposition that changes in texts do not affect anything crucial fails to explain why so much conflict and violence resulted from changes in texts.”³⁴ It is clear that Avalos and others who deny this claim either misunderstand or misrepresent its intended meaning. The claim does not deny that a particular variant may or may not have some bearing on a given doctrine, but it denies that a particular variant will be the cause for altering the doctrine. The articulation of any doctrine is not based on the wording of a single passage of scripture, but on the consensus of multiple explicit statements. The fact that a particular variant fails to articulate a doctrine does not mean that the variant denies the doctrine or that it requires a revision of the doctrine. For example, Avalos cited Mark 1:1 as an instance of a variant affecting the doctrine of the deity of Jesus, where some manuscripts have the phrase “Son of God” modifying the name “Jesus” and some do not, as though the doctrine would be affected, that is, necessarily altered. After all, my dictionary says the word “affect” means “to have an effect on; influence; produce a change in.” Now one variant in Mark 1:1 affirms the deity of Jesus and the other variant affirms nothing either for or against the deity of Jesus. A non-reading is doctrinally silent. The phrase “Son of God” occurs 46 times in the New Testament, nearly all with no significant alternate readings; it occurs twice again in Mark where the phrase is not affected by alternate readings (3:11; 15:39). If the author had doubted that Jesus was the Son of God, these phrases would not be there. The doctrine of the deity of Jesus remains unaffected by the silent variant in Mark 1:1.

Avalos cited John 1:18 as a second instance where a variant reading affects the doctrine of the deity of Jesus, where some manuscripts read “only begotten Son” and others read “only begotten God.” But on the basis of the RSV he stated that the alternate readings are “only Son” as opposed to “only begotten God.” Unfortunately, the RSV is in error here; there is no variant “only Son”; both variants have the word *μονογενής* (*monogenēs*) meaning “only begotten.” Evidently Avalos failed to consult the critical apparatus of Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament! Could it be that he doesn’t know how to use it? Jesus is referred to as God ten times

³⁴ Page 97.

in the Bible, eight times in the New Testament.³⁵ The doctrine that Jesus is God is unaffected by the variant readings in John 1:18.

Avalos also included the well-known passages where variants involving substantial segments of text are involved (Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11; and 1 John 5:7-8). But these variants are all places where the text of the alternate reading is lacking—non-readings; as mentioned above, non-readings are doctrinally silent. Avalos failed to validate his claim.

Summary

On pages 100-101, Avalos summarized his conclusions: “Historically, the primary goal of biblical textual criticism was to reconstruct the original text. Textual criticism has only shown that this is impossible. Thus textual criticism has ended in that sense.”³⁶ But this claim is supported only by quotations from likeminded scholars not by valid objective evidence. By his erroneous and careless scholarship he has demonstrated that he personally does not understand the scholarly discipline of textual criticism, its methods, and the use of the available documented evidence. His sarcasm and disrespectful rhetoric exposes his uncontrolled prejudice. This chapter, like the first, is nothing but propaganda.

Chapter 3: History and Archaeology: Fields Full of Holes

In this chapter Avalos attempted to show why the scholarly discipline of archaeology is irrelevant to Bible history, that is, archaeology fails to confirm historical statements in the Bible, and so is irrelevant to Biblical studies. In his introductory chapter, Avalos said that he “entered the University of Arizona in the hope of becoming a biblical archaeologist. . . . At the University of Arizona I encountered the exciting ideas and work of William G. Dever, who at that time had the most vibrant program in Near Eastern archaeology in the world.”³⁷ However, he changed his major and actually graduated with a major in anthropology. I understand why such changes happen. In my years of study at Purdue University, the freshman class of Electrical Engineering was large and the senior class was relatively small. Many of the intermediate students decided that if they were to graduate, they had better change their major field of study to something simpler. This chapter demonstrates why Avalos switched to anthropology.

³⁵ Psa. 45:6; Isa. 9:6; John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; 1 Tim. 3:16; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1.

³⁶ Page 100.

³⁷ Page 26.

On pages 109 through 111, Avalos introduced this chapter as demonstrating the irrelevance of the scholarly disciplines of History and Archaeology with respect to biblical studies. He stated: “In this chapter, we: (1) explore the philosophical background of the debate about biblical history and archaeology and (2) examine the claims of William G. Dever, the most powerful voice against scholars that do not see much ‘history’ in the Bible.”³⁸

Is Postmodernism the Problem?

On page 111, Avalos asserted that historians and archaeologists are beset with an epistemological problem known as postmodernism, skepticism of written history, or perhaps a more radical epistemology.

Minimalists and Maximalists

On pages 111 through 113, Avalos described the extreme opposite epistemological positions in the fields of biblical history and archaeological: (1) the minimalists who view history and archaeology from a postmodern perspective, and (2) maximalists who still regard a lot of literature as historical. He classifies Dever as a “quasiminimalist,” one left of the middle of the road.

Knowledge, Fact, and Belief

On pages 113 through 115, Avalos reclassified Dever’s epistemology as a modified positivist or a neo-pragmatist. He then asserted:

“My epistemology is a frankly presuppositional positivism, which avoids the objection that empirico-rationalism (or logical positivism) would itself not satisfy its own requirements. This presupposition is stated as a *conditional premise* that begins with an all-important *If* clause:

If you assume that your five senses and logic provide reliable data about the world, then:

- A. “Knowledge” refers only to those conclusions that have been verified directly by one or more of your five senses and/or logic. . . .
- B. “Belief” refers to any conclusion not verified by one or more of the five senses and/or logic. There are two types of beliefs:
 - 1. Reasonable beliefs are those that, while not directly verified, are at minimum based on verifiable entities and phenomena.
 - 2. Unreasonable beliefs are those that are not based on any verifiable entities or phenomena.³⁹

³⁸ Page 110.

³⁹ Page 114.

To him the term *directly verified* means “direct detection of the event, person, place, or thing in question by one or more of the five senses.” He concluded that “minimalism is the most proper approach to ancient history. Minimalism here means a historical approach that refuses to call anything a ‘fact’ or ‘knowledge’ without direct verification.”⁴⁰ But this approach is the most skeptical of all possible attempts to recover history from the available evidence. According to him, one cannot essentially *know* anything about history; one can only have a *reasonable belief* about history. But a *reasonable belief* is, after all, reasonable.

Dever and Windschuttle

On pages 115 through 121, Avalos attempted “to illustrate how Dever misidentifies the source of the problem [to know history] as postmodernism rather than as the faulty application of the positivist method to which he claims to subscribe.”⁴¹ He did so by criticizing the methodology of Dever’s favorite historian Keith Windschuttle. His lengthy discussion essentially concludes that Windschuttle (and Dever) should say “reasonably believe” rather than “know.” The problem with this conclusion is that the term *reasonable* is undefined and left to the prejudices and agendas of the historian. Avalos’ standard of reasonableness seems exceedingly high, matching his exceeding skepticism.

Dever Goes to Pot

On pages 121 through 127, without any reference to archaeological pottery, Avalos criticized Dever’s criterion of convergence—when two independent witnesses agree (converge) a historical datum is established. Avalos denied the validity of Dever’s prime example of convergence, the Merneptah Stele which documents the existence of Israel in the Palestinian area about 1210 BC. Avalos took exception to Dever’s claim, saying Pharaoh Merneptah may have been referring to another people, and Merneptah didn’t explicitly say the people called themselves by the name *Israel*. But Merneptah didn’t explicitly say any of the other people-groups listed on the stele called themselves by their recorded names either. Likewise, what other name would the Israelites call themselves? The name *Israel* occurs over a thousand times in Israel’s early literature (Exodus through 1 Samuel). Surely it is reasonable to believe Israel resided in the land at that time, based on the evidence. This is an example of Avalos’ extreme skepticism. He assumes that Israel did not exist as a nation prior to about 900 BC; that the Egyptians had no knowledge of the people of Israel prior to 1,200 BC, and that Israel’s historical literature is not valid history.

⁴⁰ Page 115.

⁴¹ Page 115.

Tel Dan About David?

On pages 127 through 130, Avalos denied that a fragmentary inscription found at Tel Dan confirmed the existence of a real historical King David. Although the inscription contains the phrases “house of David” and “king of Israel,” Avalos stated: “Many minimalists argue that the inscription was either misinterpreted or was an outright forgery.”⁴² He further argued that the word *house* may have various meanings other than dynasty. This in spite of 1 Samuel 20:16, where the term “house of David” clearly signifies the concept of dynasty: “So Jonathan made a *covenant* with the house of David, *saying*, "Let the LORD require *it* at the hand of David's enemies.” He asserted: “there is still debate about what “house of *dwd*” means because *dwd* (sic) might refer to the temple or palace of a person, place, or god.”⁴³ But surely he referred to the word *byt* (house of) instead of *dwd* (David)—a careless typo. But contrary to Avalos’ extreme skepticism, the inscription is now widely accepted as authentic and referring to the biblical David. In addition, Avalos failed to mention that some reputable scholars believe that the Mesha Stone, dated c. 840 BC, also has a reference to *byt dwd* (house of David).

Solomon and Bill’s Gates

On pages 130 through 135, Avalos disputed Dever’s conclusion that the convergence of the biblical account of Solomon’s building activity at Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer with the archaeological evidence confirms Solomon’s historical existence. He argued that other archaeologists disagree with Dever’s assignment of dates, and that even Dever changed his mind on his dates for Hazor and Megiddo, thus diminishing the certainty of his conclusions. The bottom line is that Dever should have expressed his conclusions in less certain terms. Avalos said: “What Dever called historical ‘data’ and ‘facts’ turned out to be, at least in these cases, interpretations after all.”⁴⁴ But Dever’s interpretations are, at least, reasonable beliefs.

Out on a Date

On pages 135 through 138, Avalos again took issue with Dever’s date of ceramic pottery found at Megiddo and elsewhere. He disputed Dever’s claim to have dates not based on statements in the Bible. But he failed to mention that a portion of Shishak’s victory stele was found at Megiddo setting an independent witness to the date for the destruction of Megiddo. So it is reasonable to believe that Shishak conquered and destroyed Megiddo.

⁴² Page 128.

⁴³ Page 129.

⁴⁴ Page 135.

Solomon's Palace?

On pages 138 through 141, Avalos attempted to discredit David Ussishkin's comparison of the palace architecture at Megiddo with that of Solomon's palace in Jerusalem as described in 1 Kings 7:1-12. Avalos complained "that Ussishkin's comparison omits a major building or portion of the palace . . . called 'The House of the Forrest of Lebanon.'"⁴⁵ But 1 Kings 7 actually describes five separate structures: (1) the House of the Forrest of Lebanon, (2) the Hall of Pillars, (3) the Hall of the Throne, (4) the Hall of Judgment, and (5) his own house where he lived. Only the fifth must be regarded as a palace, the other structures may be regarded as places where government or public activity took place. The fact that Ussishkin omitted reference to the House of the Forest of Lebanon in his comparison likely means that he did not regard that building as part of Solomon's royal palace.

Forging Ahead

On pages 141 through 145, Avalos criticized Dever's use of forged archaeological artifacts as evidence for the historicity of certain Bible passages. He stated that "forgeries and unprovenanced items are certainly part of the reason there is enormous skepticism in biblical archaeology."⁴⁶ He focused on an inscribed ivory pomegranate which Dever used as support for the existence of Solomon's temple, and on an inscribed ossuary box he used as evidence for the existence of Jesus. These artifacts were declared forgeries by the Israel Antiquities Authority, but as for the ossuary box, an independent study by a team of experts ruled that the box is authentic. Avalos is right, unprovenanced artifacts are potential forgeries and must be examined with thorough, unbiased care; but not all are forgeries, and worthy ones should be accepted as reasonable to believe. The Dead Sea Scrolls are mostly unprovenanced, and yet Avalos was willing to accept their witness in chapter two.

The Divided Monarchy and Statehood

On pages 145 through 150, Avalos argued that Dever and others used archaeology to support the nationhood and statehood of ancient Israel. He stated that "many complain that archaeology has been used as part of a Zionist enterprise to dispossess the Palestinians."⁴⁷ He criticized Raz Kletter's statistical study of four artifacts he regarded as Judean in an effort to mark off the boundary of ancient Judea. Avalos quibbled over Kletter's use of the terms *Judea* and *Ju-*

⁴⁵ Page 139.

⁴⁶ Page 145.

⁴⁷ Pages 145-46.

dean, and he disputed the validity of Kletter's statistics. He wrote of Kletter's study: "Of the one hundred twenty *lmlk* stamps he used for his data, about thirty-seven (7 percent) are found at Gezer."⁴⁸ But even a sixth grader knows that 37 is not 7% of 120. Actually, 37 is 7% of 529, or 37 is 30.8% of 120. So it seems that Avalos does not understand statistics either. Furthermore, the nationhood or statehood of ancient Israel and Judea does not depend on figurines and stamps; ancient Near Eastern inscriptions from the eighth century and later identify Israel as a people group having, a land, a king,⁴⁹ waging wars, and paying tribute; and inscriptions from the seventh century and later do the same for Judea.⁵⁰

Nationalism and Archaeology

On page 151 through 152, Avalos continued his argument against using archaeology to support Israeli nationalism. He criticized Harvard law professor Alan Dersowitz's brief summary of Israel's history as imprecise, saying: "Dersowitz does not know his history very well because the Bible never claims that Joshua was a king or had a kingdom."⁵¹ But Dersowitz was not speaking precisely as a historian but as a lawyer; and he did not actually say Joshua was a king or had a kingdom. His words need only be interpreted to mean Joshua was a national leader, the successor of Moses. Avalos is the one who doesn't read carefully. His anti-Semitic bias has led him to be overly skeptical of legitimate archaeological evidence.

Nationalism and Chronology

On pages 153 through 154, Avalos complained that biblical archaeologists aligned the commonly accepted successive ages of technological progress—Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age—with the history of Israel as portrayed in the Bible. He was disturbed particularly because they end the Iron Age with the year 586 BC—the date of the Roman destruction of the second temple. To him this is a sign of objectionable nationalism. But this complaint is just more anti-Semitic quibbling. Biblical archaeologists, like all other archaeologists, designate specific dates according to the Gregorian calendar.

⁴⁸ Page 150. Obviously the stamps are no longer in Gezah, but in some museum or university library.

⁴⁹ The Moabite Stone (c. 830 BC) records Mesha, king of Moab, waging war with Omri, king of Israel (ANET, p. 320); an inscription of Shalmanezar III (858-824 BC) records his defeat of Ahab, king of Israel (ANET, p. 279) and receiving tribute from Jehu, son of Omri (ANET p. 280); an inscription of Adad-Nirari III (810-783 BC) records his conquest of Tyre, Sidon, and Israel (ANET, p. 282).

⁵⁰ An inscription of Tiglath-Pilezer III (744-727 BC) records receiving tribute from Jehoahaz king of Judah (ANET, p. 282); an inscription of Sargon II (721-705 BC) records his conquest of Samaria, Israel, and Judah (ANET, pp. 287-88); an inscription of Esarhaddon (680—669 BC) claimed he ruled over Manasseh, king of Judah.

⁵¹ Page 151.

King Arthur as Analogy

On pages 154 through 160, Avalos argued that the historicity of King David is about as valid as that of King Arthur. He wrote: “it is fruitless to think that we know much about a United Monarchy when there is so much more material about the kingdom of Arthur, a figure almost everyone agrees is mostly mythical.”⁵² While there may be more material about Arthur, it is not quantity of material but quality that matters. Arthur has no recorded ancestry and no recorded dynasty, whereas David has both. In addition, some of David’s royal descendants are confirmed by inscriptional evidence as to name, place, time, and deeds.⁵³ So it is reasonable to believe that the sources to which the biblical historians referred—probably royal court records—were reliable, even though not all of David’s successors are confirmed by surviving ancient secular inscriptions. Most non-minimalist archaeologists regard King David to have been a real person of history.

Arthurian Archaeology

On pages 160 through 162, Avalos argued that archaeological evidence discovered at Cadbury Castle in Somerset “led some archaeologists to conclude that it had been inhabited around 500 and 400 BCE.”⁵⁴ Since Arthur has been associated with Cadbury Castle, some have suggested that this alleged “convergence” substantiates the historicity of King Arthur, much like the Tel Dan inscription confirms the historicity of King David. But this is faulty analogy; the name of Arthur was not found at Cadbury Castle like David’s name was found at Tel Dan. In addition, the places associated with King Arthur are mostly obscure; whereas, most of the places associated with King David in the Bible are validated by archaeology as to name, geographical location, and as existing in the time of David.

So What Do We Know?

On pages 162 through 164, Avalos summarized his conclusions. He concluded: “Minimalism is the most appropriate empirico-rationalist and positivist stance toward all ancient history. . . . a set of standards nearly impossible to obtain for the establishment of the historicity of most ancient stories.”⁵⁵ Basically, he believes that we can “know” nothing of Israel’s ancient his-

⁵² Page 160.

⁵³ Senacherib (704-681 BC) laid siege to the cities of Hezekiah king of Judah (ANET p. 287-88; cf. 2 Kgs. 18 & 19; 2 Chr. 32); Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) had Manasseh King of Judah under servitude (ANET p. 291); Ashurbanipal (668-633 BC) had Manasseh king of Judah under servitude (ANET p. 294); Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC) had Jehoiachin king of Judah under servitude (ANET p. 308).

⁵⁴ Page 161.

⁵⁵ Page 162.

tory; but that an entity called “Israel” probably existed in the days of Merneptah (c. 1210 BC) and that it is reasonable to believe in the existence of seven of the kings of the northern kingdom and of three of the kings of the southern kingdom based on corroboration in Assyrian and Babylonian documents. But he is extremely skeptical; those ancient documents also corroborate dates, places, and deeds of those kings. Most non-minimalist archaeologists and historians agree that the biblical record of Israel’s history from the tenth century on is reliable.

Although Avalos has had some college classes in biblical archaeology, it is evident that he is not academically qualified to judge the relevance of archaeology to biblical studies. His handling of evidence is selective and he depends on selected quotations from fellow minimalists for support of his arguments. His anti-Bible, anti-Israel, and anti-religion prejudices dominate his thinking so that his reasoning is faulty. He depends on his academic credentials and his university status to hoodwink his readers into believing he knows what he is talking about. But just as he thinks that people can “know” nothing of ancient history, so he has demonstrated that he “knows” very little of the relevance of biblical archaeology to biblical studies.

Chapter 4: The Unhistorical Jesus

In this chapter Avalos argued against the historicity of Jesus. He stated: “We demonstrate the failure of the supposedly more philosophically sophisticated historical methods used to combat naturalism in explaining biblical events.”⁵⁶ He concentrated his argument on the historicity of Jesus as presented in (1) the Jesus Seminar and (2) the research of Stanley Porter. He concluded: “Neither side has produced any verifiable knowledge about Jesus.”⁵⁷ But in this conclusion Avalos excluded the possibility of “reasonable beliefs”—an alternative he admitted in chapter three.

Resurrecting the Resurrection

On pages 186 through 190, Avalos discussed the difference between *ontological naturalism* and *methodological naturalism*. He then criticized the historical methodology used by William Lane Craig to establish the reasonableness of the resurrection of Jesus. Craig’s methodology is an adaptation of the methodology developed by historian C. B. McCullagh based on methodological naturalism. McCullagh’s sixth criterion reads in part: “It must be *disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs* than any other incompatible hypothesis about the same subject.”⁵⁸ Whereas, Craig’s adaptation reads in part: “*It far outstrips any rival theories in meeting conditions 1*

⁵⁶ Page 185.

⁵⁷ Page 186.

⁵⁸ Page 189.

through 5. Down through history various rival explanations have been offered . . . Such hypotheses have been almost universally rejected by contemporary scholarship. No naturalistic hypothesis has attracted a great number of scholars.”⁵⁹ Avalos seems to have thought Craig misrepresented McCullagh’s sixth criterion, he stated: “Craig’s representation of [McCullagh’s] sixth criterion . . . apparently now refers to how much consensus a theory has gained.”⁶⁰ Evidently Avalos does not understand either Craig or McCullagh; Craig did not use the term “consensus” or use words that imply consensus. Evidently Craig had examined all the alternate naturalistic *accepted beliefs* that *disconfirm* the resurrection of Jesus and found them to be almost universally unaccepted hypotheses, not beliefs. Craig’s expression “no naturalistic hypothesis has attracted a great number of scholars” does not express consensus but rather a paucity of acceptance of each and every alternate hypothesis.

Marian Apparitions and the Resurrection

On pages 191 through 194, Avalos argued that “McCullagh’s criteria, as used by Craig, are satisfied by many other events.”⁶¹ He used the apparitions of Mary as an illustration of his claim. He did so by essentially substituting the name “Mary” for the name “Jesus” in Craig’s argument for the resurrection of Jesus. But Avalos surely must have used ridicule rather than serious reasoning because the alleged parallelism is mostly far-fetched and outlandish. For example, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus comes from the Bible, but the Bible says little about Mary’s life and nothing about her death, burial, and an alleged resurrection. In the application of the first criteria, he substitutes “faith in Marian apparitions” for “Christian faith”; even a sixth grade Sunday School student would regard that comparison as preposterous.

In the application of the third criterion, he compared “Mary’s own unparalleled life and claims” with those of Jesus. But apart from her genealogy and her virgin conception of Jesus, the Bible provides little information of her life and claims. She did not claim that she would be resurrected from the dead or be kept alive or ascend bodily to Heaven. So there is little to compare with the life and claims of Jesus. And those who do believe in the resurrection of Mary do it on the basis of a papal decree, not on the basis of biblical evidence. In the application of the sixth criterion, he compared “contemporary Marian scholarship” with “contemporary scholarship.” Again there is no comparison; any so-called Marian “scholarship” is based on a papal decree, not on any historical evidence.

⁵⁹ Page 188.

⁶⁰ Page 189.

⁶¹ Page 191.

Avalos then attempted to respond to some of Craig's more common arguments for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. With regard to the first argument, he stated: "the empty tomb story cannot be verified by an independent source outside the Bible."⁶² Like all critics of the historicity of the bible, Avalos here would treat the four Gospels as interdependent sources that do not independently verify one another. But there are sufficient reasons to believe the Gospels were written independently in the first century AD by eye witnesses of the empty tomb, as well as of the life and ministry of Jesus in general (Matthew, Mark, and John) or by interrogation of such eye witnesses (Luke), so that the Gospels rightly verify the historical validity of one another. Avalos' anti-Bible, anti-Christian, anti-religion, and anti-supernatural presuppositions blind him to the historical validity of the Gospels.⁶³

With regard to the second argument, Avalos wrote: "We actually do not know whether the disciples were willing to die for anything. Besides, a willingness to die for beliefs does not make those beliefs true."⁶⁴ It's true that we don't *know* (according to Avalos' definition of the term), but there are sufficient reasons to believe that thousands of believers died for not recanting their faith, indicating they confidence in the truth of the resurrection.

With regard to the third argument: "There was no preexisting resurrection tradition, and so the resurrection can be presumed to be linked to an authentically new event."⁶⁵ Avalos correctly denied the truth of this statement, if Craig is correctly understood. Avalos cited Mark 6:16 as evidence of Herod's belief that John the Baptist was resurrected. This was a rather weak counter example, since it represents the "belief" of only one person, not the many that usually define a tradition. Nevertheless, many people believed Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45), as well as the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-15). But the failure of this point is not crucial to the debate.

With regard to the fourth argument: "Eyewitnesses listed in 1 Corinthians 15 guarantee that such appearances occurred."⁶⁶ Avalos erroneously compared these sightings with reported mass apparitions of Mary, but there is no comparison. The eyewitnesses listed in 1 Corinthians

⁶² Page 192.

⁶³ Their reports of the same events lack any significant evidence of verbatim copying from one another.

⁶⁴ Page 192.

⁶⁵ Page 192.

⁶⁶ Page 193.

were personal friends and family members of Jesus, and their sightings included conversations, bodily contact, and shared meals—something quite different from an illusion.

As for the fifth argument: “The time between the claimed event and the stories is too short for legendary development.”⁶⁷ Avalos erroneously compared the time required for the development of legends in the first century AD with that of the twentieth century, using stories of alleged appearances of Elvis as an example. But the speed of the dissemination of public information in the time of Jesus cannot be reasonably compared with that of the nearly instantaneous electronic distribution of public information in Elvis’ twentieth century.

With respect to the sixth argument: “The biblical sources have otherwise been proven reliable.”⁶⁸ Avalos denied this argument by citing an alleged contradiction in Stephen’s defense before his executioners (Acts 7) First, Avalos said Stephen wrongly identified the location of Abraham’s tomb as in Shechem (7:15-16), whereas it was actually in Hebron (Gen. 23:19-20; 25:9-10); but Avalos evidently does not distinguish an accurate record of a speech from an insignificant technical error in the speech. Stephen was defending himself against the charge of blasphemy, not making an official statement on biblical geography. In such a stressful circumstance, it is understandable that he might have a lapse of memory. Second, Avalos asserted that the Apostle Paul wrongfully identified those who buried Jesus as the residents of Jerusalem (Acts 13:27-29), which “contradicts other Gospels, which insist that it was Jesus’ own disciples who buried him (e.g., Matthew 28:57-61 [sic 27:57-61]).”⁶⁹ Avalos blundered multiply in this false claim: The book of Acts is not a Gospel; Matthew’s account of Jesus’ burial is a simple assertion not an insistence; and again he does not distinguish an accurate record of a speech from an insignificant technical error in the speech. The Apostle Paul was preaching on the resurrection of Jesus in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia; the subject matter of the sermon was the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, not the technical details of the burial. Avalos seems to be unable to distinguish what is relevant from what is irrelevant.

With regard to the seventh argument: “The social disregard for women’s testimony renders it unlikely that biblical authors would have chosen women as witnesses, and so we can presume the women’s testimony to be an authentic tradition.”⁷⁰ Avalos denied this argument by cit-

⁶⁷ Page 193.

⁶⁸ Page 193.

⁶⁹ Page 193.

⁶⁹ Page 193.

ing examples of the common use of unreliable witnesses in stories of extraordinary events. But his examples are from other cultures in other eras. Craig's whole point is based on the fact that in first century Jewish culture, the witness of women was regarded as unreliable. The practice of other cultures in other eras is irrelevant to the argument at hand.

Finally, with regard to the eighth argument: "Secular historians don't apply the same critical standards to non-Christian figures such as Augustus Caesar."⁷¹ Avalos denied this argument, claiming that the extra-biblical witness of Tacitus and Josephus cannot be securely dated to the first century. But this claim is not supported by most scholars whether Christian or not. Avalos has a significant problem with viewing the history of Jesus in an unbiased manner. His anti-supernatural presuppositions seem unshakable.

Selective Supernaturalism

On pages 194 through 195, Avalos erroneously criticized Craig for inconsistently regarding certain biblical passages as historically unreliable. Of course, one would expect Craig to be consistent in the application of his methodology, and he was; his methodology includes rejecting as historically authentic any passage with apocalyptic embellishment. I do not agree with Craig's criterion here, but at least he was consistent. And this alleged inconsistency has no relevance to Craig's defense of the resurrection of Jesus.

The Liberal Academic Jesuses

On pages 195 through 203, Avalos rightly criticized liberal scholarship devoted to the study of "the historical Jesus." This includes his evaluation of the Jesus Seminar (pages 198-203). Regarding the Jesus Seminar he concluded: "The Jesus Seminar has predetermined what Jesus or the early church thought, and then they have simply selected those verses that accord with what the Jesus Seminar thinks that Jesus thought. . . All they have done is create a Jesus in their own image."⁷² I agree with Avalos, this type of biblical studies should end.

Stanley Porter's New Criteria

On pages 203 through 209, Avalos criticized the scholarship of evangelical Stanley Porter. Avalos noted that Porter's criteria consist of (1) the Greek language and its context; (2) textual variance; and (3) discourse features. Avalos' discussion of these criteria and Porter's appli-

⁷⁰ Page 193.

⁷¹ Page 193.

⁷² Page 203.

cation of them makes it clear, as I have noted earlier that “he personally does not understand the scholarly discipline of textual criticism, its methods, and the use of the available documented evidence (p. 17).” In this section, he has demonstrated a deficiency in the technicalities of Greek grammar, syntax, and discourse. He is not competent to provide a scholarly evaluation of Porter’s work.

Why We Cannot Make Progress

On pages 209 through 210, Avalos explained that the confusion of “reality with its representation is at the heart of most failures of biblical studies. We can see this confusion between reality and its representation in historical Jesus studies, textual criticism, and biblical archaeology.”⁷³ He illustrated the alleged problem by the difference between the reality of a physical object and its representation in a picture. But in my opinion, Avalos is the one confused; his analogy does not represent the issues at hand. The reality sought by textual critical scholars is the autographic *text*, not the original material document. A flawless copy of the original document would contain the autographic *text* perfectly; it could not be considered a mere picture. Although such a perfect copy does not exist, yet hundreds of copies have survived throughout history, each containing the original *text* with modest accidental variations; they cannot be regarded as mere pictures. The original text is contained in the genealogical consensus of the copies at hand. The reality sought by historical Jesus scholars is not Jesus but His *sayings*; this also is an exercise in textual criticism focused only on Jesus’ *sayings*, not necessarily on the entire text of the Gospels. The reality sought by biblical archaeologists is not King David or King Solomon, but the history of the land of Israel and its inhabitants, the objective evidence of which is the cultural artifacts that have survived the ravages of time. These are not mere pictures but actual objective remnants of the real thing. Avalos is the one who cannot recognize reality when he sees it.

Other Gospels Change Everything

On pages 210 through 212, Avalos argued that the recent discoveries of new non-canonical gospels make a significant difference in historical Jesus studies. He stated: “we can no longer privilege just the canonical Gospels as the earliest or best sources for depicting early Christianity.”⁷⁴ While studies of these new documents are necessary for completeness in the field, most scholars do not regard them to have any significance for historical Jesus studies. The fact that these apocryphal Gospels remained hidden for so long is evidence that historically they have been regarded as insignificant.

⁷³ Page 209.

⁷⁴ Page 211.

Summary

On page 212, Avalos summarized his conclusions: “The quest for the historical Jesus is an abject failure. . . . Further progress is futile because we simply don’t have any preserved accounts of Jesus from his time or from any proven eyewitnesses.” He dismisses conservative scholars as religiously motivated and intellectually dishonest by implication. He also suggested that all should join in his secular humanistic agenda. In my opinion, this chapter is nothing but propaganda.

Chapter 5: Literary Criticism: Aesthetics as Apologetics

For the purposes of this chapter, Avalos uses the term “literary criticism to describe a suite of approaches unified by the idea that biblical texts are constructed artfully and have artistic merit.”⁷⁵ Of course, I assume that he means “some biblical texts,” otherwise one may suppose he thinks literary criticism views the Bible as something like an anthology of religious poems. In this chapter, Avalos attempts show that some biblical apologists wrongfully use “the supposed beauty of the Bible . . . to maintain its value and to keep the profession of biblical studies alive.”⁷⁶ In order to support this conclusion he attempted to “show that: (1) literary beauty is subjective . . . ; (2) the Bible fails to satisfy the standards of beauty set by scholars themselves; (3) other texts could also satisfy or surpass the Bible . . . ; (4) ethics can be invoked to judge some biblical texts as aesthetically defective.”⁷⁷ Of course, (1) since literary beauty is subjective, liberal scholars like Avalos should not deny others the freedom to have their own criteria of beauty; (2) no one claims that all biblical passages are aesthetically beautiful; (3) no one claims that other texts may not exceed the beauty of the Bible; and (4) there is no necessary relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

A Brief History of Aesthetics

On pages 221 through 223, Avalos provided a historical background for a discussion of aesthetics. He described how people have differently perceived beauty and ugliness in art and literature; and how some perceptions have changed. “What has changed, however, is increased attention to how art functions as an expression of power and oppression.”⁷⁸ This opinion seems

⁷⁵ Page 219.

⁷⁶ Page 220.

⁷⁷ Page 221.

⁷⁸ Page 222.

to expose his secular humanistic perspective of the world. I doubt that very many ordinary people perceive expressions of power and oppression in modern surrealistic art. All I see is the reflection of a troubled mind and a chaotic life. However, he acknowledged that “the notion that beauty is a cultural construct is routinely accepted.”⁷⁹ So why should he be intolerant of his peers’ aesthetic appreciation of the Bible?

Is Isaiah 40 a Masterpiece?

On pages 223 through 224, he discussed the fortieth chapter of Isaiah “in order to understand how meaningless or subjective literary beauty can be.” He compared two English translations of one verse (vs. 26) in this chapter with respect to his subjective perspective of literary beauty. One translation is rather literal (RSV) and the other is a free paraphrase (TLB). On the basis of this single comparison he concluded that the chapter has no more literary beauty than any other literature from the Ancient Near East; this in spite of acknowledging that some of his academic peers regard the chapter as a literary masterpiece. Avalos did not report or respond to any of the reasons why these scholars held that view. Nor did he refer to the Hebrew text where the scholars saw such beauty, rather in a translation. This is an example of his shameless intolerance of the views of others.

Symmetry and Beauty

On pages 224 through 227, Avalos discussed the relationship between symmetry and beauty. He admitted that many think that symmetry has a measure of beauty, and he acknowledged that many of his peers see a form of symmetry in the various patterns of parallelism of thought and in the quasi-metric structure of Hebrew poetry; although he failed to mention anything about the system of accentuation in the Hebrew Bible. He concluded by questioning the beauty of these features of symmetry, and how they are different in the Hebrew Bible from the same features in the other Ancient Near Eastern literature. But no one claims that biblical literature is necessarily more beautiful than other literature, but that these features are relevant and worthy of continued study.

Is Dissymmetry Ugly?

On pages 227 through 229, Avalos discussed the relationship of dissymmetry and beauty. There he accused his peers of being inconsistent for not necessarily regarding dissymmetric literature as ugly or at least not beautiful. But ordinary prose, the most common form of literature in any language, is basically dissymmetrical; no one thinks or ever imagines that ordinary prose is

⁷⁹ Page 222-23.

ugly, or for that matter, beautiful. The ordinary is neutral on the scale of beauty vs. ugly. In order to illustrate his point, Avalos used the book of Jeremiah as an example of dissymmetry. He compared the order of five selected pericopes in the Hebrew text with the order of the same pericopes in the Greek translation of the book, finding dissimilar locations of the selected passages. While some degree of symmetry may be observed between the lines of a stanza in a Hebrew poem, or even at times between stanzas of the same poem; no one would expect symmetry in the order of independent pericopes. The dissimilar order of independent passages is a matter of textual criticism, not of literary beauty. Avalos was grasping at straws.

Artistry and Creativity

On pages 229 through 233, Avalos argued: “If . . . creativity is a mark of artistry and genius, then the Bible would not fare so well in many instances.”⁸⁰ In order to show the lack of creativity in the Bible, he pointed to a lack of originality in the use of “word pairs” in the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. He alleged that the monotonous repetition of parallel word pairs, like “head/brow” and “thousand/ten-thousand” and others, displays a lack of originality. He reinforced this claim by the fact that the same word pairs are also found in the other ancient Semitic literature. This charge is based on the false assumption that originality and creativity are found in vocabulary. It’s as though Avalos expected that for the biblical poets to be creative and original they should have coined a new parallel synonym for the word “head” every time it occurred in a poem. Creativity and originality are not found in vocabulary but in profound thoughts like: God is one; love your neighbor; do good to your enemy; etc., etc.

Alphabet Soup

On pages 232 and 233, Avalos discussed the alphabetic acrostic poems of the Hebrew Bible. Such poems each contain 22 lines the first word of which begins with succeeding letter of the alphabet, in alphabetic order. Such poems do exhibit the creativity, originality, and skill of the poet. However, Avalos pointed out that some of the acrostic poems are incomplete or the lines are in differing alphabetic order, thus spoiling their aesthetic beauty. Nevertheless, he admitted that the traditional order of the Hebrew alphabet has changed over the centuries, and that he doesn’t know what objective the poet may have had for any original deviation from the traditional order of the letters. Finally, any deviation from the original order of the lines is a matter of textual criticism, not of aesthetic beauty. The cook is in the wrong kitchen.

⁸⁰ Page 229.

Narrative Beauty?

On pages 233 through 234, Avalos discussed the fact that some scholars perceive aesthetic value in “poetic narrative” of the Bible. With no discussion of evidence, he concluded: “focus on biblical artistry provides no better grounds for privileging that text over those of many other cultures.”⁸¹ I doubt that any of the scholars Avalos quoted really thought the aesthetic beauty of the Bible grants it privilege over other texts.

Law, Education, and Aesthetics

On pages 234 through 237, Avalos discussed the constitutionality of teaching the Bible in public schools, and the merits of its study for its “literary and historic qualities.” Besides the section heading, this division of the chapter contains no reference to aesthetics or to any synonyms of the word. The discussion is totally irrelevant to the main theme of the chapter.

Ethics and Aesthetics

On pages 237 through 240, Avalos argued that works of art, such as some poetry in the Hebrew Bible, cannot be regarded as aesthetically beautiful because they portray reprehensibly unethical events. While he did not directly mention the song the Israeli maidens sang to celebrate David’s defeat of Goliath, the Philistine giant (1 Samuel 18:7), that is clearly what he had in mind when he said: “My impression is that no matter how skillful we are in our parallelisms or use of word-pairs, such a poem would rightly be seen by many Americans as morally objectionable. We could not celebrate a poem that glorifies the brutal beheading of another human being.”⁸² He likewise denied any aesthetic beauty to poetry portraying slaughter of children (Psalm 137). But would those reprehensible events be ethically any different if they had been written in prose rather than poetry? Clearly not! So Avalos has failed to make two important distinctions: (1) he failed to distinguish the event from the manner in which it was recorded; we can admire an artist’s skill in portraying something reprehensible without regarding him or his artistic skill as reprehensible. (2) He failed to distinguish the Bible’s historical records from its ethical instructions; the Bible does not comment the sin of the historical events it records.

Summary

On pages 240 through 241, Avalos concluded (1) “biblical scholars have failed to provide coherent rationale for why biblical literature is better than that of many other cultures.” But in my opinion he has failed to show that anyone made such a claim with respect to aesthetics—the sub-

⁸¹ Page 234.

⁸² Page 237.

ject of this chapter. (2) The Bible has been studied long enough, so it is time to study other ancient literature; “likewise, aesthetic worth can be found in many ancient texts.” In my opinion, the other ancient literature has been studied adequately as Avalos’ statement implies; it lacks the lasting interest of the biblical texts. (3) “The question of relevance is particularly acute for ancient texts such as the Bible.” But if the ancient texts are irrelevant, why should they merit more study than the Bible? However, the topic of this chapter is *aesthetics* not *relevance*, so this claim lacks relevance to this chapter. (4) “For every page of *Hamlet* that we might enjoy innocently, there is a passage of the Bible that prompts someone to kill another human being.” This false charge lacks any evidence and is also irrelevant to the topic of the chapter. It is nothing less than irresponsible propaganda.

Chapter 6: Biblical Theology: The Pathology of Bibliolatry

In this chapter, Avalos argued “that biblical theology should end because it is not a scholarly discipline that can yield anything of use for modern human beings.”⁸³ To accomplish this goal he attempted to “show that biblical theology: (1) primarily is an apologetic endeavor that functions to maintain the value and authority of the Bible in the modern world; (2) often is selective and arbitrary in judging what counts as ‘central’ or ‘significant’ features of biblical thought; and (3) violates many of its own stated goals and assumptions.” He chose “five academic socio-religious traditions within Christianity and Judaism” as targets of his criticism, as represented by (1) European Walter Eichrodt; (2) American Walter Brueggemann; (3) Jewish Jon D. Levenson; (4) Feminist Phyllis Trible; and (5) Liberation Theologian [Gustavo Gutierrez?].

Historical Background

On pages 250-51, Avalos provided his own definition of the term *biblical theology* “as an enterprise that purports to describe the ideas about God and his interaction with humanity that are expressed by biblical authors.”⁸⁴ This definition, which he targets in his criticism, is significantly different than what modern biblical scholars regard as biblical theology. According to Baker’s *Evangelical Dictionary*, *Biblical Theology* is the “Study of the Bible that seeks to discover what the biblical writers, under divine guidance, believed, described, and taught in the context of their own times. . . . Biblical theology is related to but different from three other major branches of theological inquiry. Practical theology focuses on pastoral application of biblical truths in modern life. Systematic theology articulates the biblical outlook in a current doctrinal or

⁸³ P. 249.

⁸⁴ P. 250.

philosophical system. Historical theology investigates the development of Christian thought in its growth through the centuries since biblical times.”⁸⁵ So Avalos attached the wrong label to the target of his attack. Furthermore, he asserted that “no matter which type one prefers, the lesson is that there is no such thing as a unified ‘biblical theology,’ *nor can there be.*”⁸⁶ So, by his own admission, his target does not exist. Moreover, his representative theologians would not classify their branch of theology as *Biblical Theology* in the technical sense, but only in the sense that the Bible is one of their sources of study.

Walther Eichrodt (1890-1978)

On pages 251 through 256, Avalos discussed Eichrodt’s idea that a “covenant” was a central theme in the Old Testament, finding what he regarded as Eichrodt’s inconsistencies and contradictions. Avalos seems unaware that throughout history God’s covenant people Israel rebelled against the covenant, turning away from the one true God to the idolatry and rituals of its pagan neighbors. It is not surprising that archaeologists find evidence of such profane behavior. One must distinguish between the monotheism proclaimed by Israel’s prophets and the rebellious practices of the people; Avalos seem unable to do so.

Walter Brueggemann

On pages 256 through 261, Avalos discussed the theological views of Brueggemann, classifying him as “postmodern and nontraditional.” According to his peers “Brueggemann is an advocate and practitioner of rhetorical criticism” and “is known throughout the world for his method of combining literary and sociological modes when reading Bible.”⁸⁷ Thus his theology is not technically a *Biblical Theology*. Nevertheless, Avalos used his discussion of Brueggemann as a platform for finding fault with the Bible. He could have just as easily done so without the pretense of theology.

Jon D. Levenson

On pages 261 through 270, Avalos discussed the theological views of Levenson, a Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School. He stated: “We use the word ‘theology’ with great caution in the case of Levenson because he explicitly affirms that biblical theology can barely be found, if at all, in Jewish scholarship.”⁸⁸ It is quite clear that Levenson is not a rep-

⁸⁵ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/biblical-theology.html>.

⁸⁶ Page 251, emphasis his.

⁸⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Brueggemann.

representative of *Biblical Theology*, so why would Avalos include him in a chapter on that topic? Evidently he needed a Jewish platform for finding fault with the Bible from that perspective.

Feminist Theologies

On pages 271 through 273, Avalos discussed the theologies of various feminists, and that of Phyllis Tribble in particular. Her peers regard her as “one of the prominent matriarchs of contemporary feminist bible criticism.”⁸⁹ So Tribble, like the others, is not technically a representative of *Biblical Theology*, but a platform for finding fault with the Bible from a feminist perspective.

Liberation Theologies

On pages 273 through 280, Avalos discussed the views of various liberation theologians without focusing on any one in particular. He rightly criticized the logic of these theologians and their use of the Bible to support their Marxist views. Obviously these theologians are not representatives of *Biblical Theology*, and again provide a platform for finding fault with the Bible from that perspective.

Summary

On page 280, Avalos summarized his criticism of the various theologies he discussed, none of which are technically representatives of *Biblical Theology*—the alleged topic of this chapter. I have not responded to the faults he found with the Bible from a theological perspective, none of which are new and have not been adequately answered by competent scholars. He stated: “Despite the claims of academic rigor and increasing self criticism, all biblical theologies have one thing in common: bibliolatry.” This term is derogatory, inaccurate, and unbecoming a gentleman; he provided no evidence for such a claim. Most biblical scholars would regard the Bible to have some authority with respect to theology; but none of the scholars he named, in fact, no competent scholar regards the Bible as an object of worship.

Finally he asserted: “biblical theologians endeavor to rescue the Bible from itself, while providing the illusion that biblical theology should matter. Such an attitude serves to maintain the employment of biblical theologians.” This derogatory accusation, which is implied frequently throughout the book, is unsubstantiated propaganda used to support his own weak theology.

⁸⁸ Pages 261-62.

⁸⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Tribble.

Chapter 7: Academia: Religionism by Degrees

Avalos stated: “In this chapter we detail some specific examples of how supposedly secularized academia still supports a religionist agenda, even in greatly weakened form. . . . Most religious studies programs in public institutions espouse a liberal or pluralistic approach to religion that frowns on criticism of religion as a whole.” Of course, he advocates that such institutions should have no religious studies at all.

Twentieth-Century Rationales

On pages 292 through 295, Avalos described “two contradictory rationales . . . for the study of the Bible in higher education: (1) Decreasing interest in the study of the Bible must be reversed; and (2) Increased interest in the study of the Bible necessitates meeting the demand.”⁹⁰ After discussing the merits of these views, he concluded that “we probably do need more understanding of religion, but such understanding should focus on how religion itself causes conflict, or on how religion should be abandoned.”⁹¹ He further concluded that the current thinking in academia is “that religion is essentially good, and that it should not be discarded altogether. . . . What has replaced ‘fundamentalism’ is simply liberal religionism.”⁹² In fact, he cited Wilfred C. Smith who admitted that biblical studies in academia “are on the whole calculated to turn a fundamentalist into a liberal.”⁹³ It is hard to see how this intentional subversion fits into the ethics of truth-seeking scholarship. What followed is his attempt to demonstrate this fact by an evaluation of three universities: (1) Harvard University; (2) the University of Chicago; and (3) the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Harvard University

On pages 295 through 298, Avalos described the history of Harvard University, beginning with its Puritan seventeenth-century origin, and concluding with its status in the days of his study there (1983). He stated: “what I witnesses at Harvard Divinity School was the consolidation of a liberal religionist hegemony.”⁹⁴ He concluded “that the goal of any university should be to undermine not just orthodox theology but all types of theology. Harvard Divinity School,

⁹⁰ Page 292.

⁹¹ Page 294.

⁹² Page 295.

⁹³ Page 295.

⁹⁴ Page 297.

therefore, remains quite religionist by this standard.”⁹⁵ On the contrary, the goal of any university should be the unprejudiced inquiry of truth to the extent that it may be known.

The University of Chicago

On pages 298 through 300, Avalos described the history of the University of Chicago, beginning with its late nineteenth-century religious origin, and concluding with its status today. He concluded that “we still have a major elite university promoting the maintenance of theological education in modern society instead of helping people to go beyond theology.”

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

On pages 300 through 301, Avalos described the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a public institution with a secular orientation. The faculty members of its Department of Religious Studies are well known for their non-biblical views. He stated: “But despite its seemingly secularized situation, we still find religionism in its Department of Religious Studies.”⁹⁶ It is hard to understand why a department of religious studies would not have some form of religionism in its curriculum and faculty; for it to be otherwise would be illogical and unethical.

Summary

On pages 301 through 302, Avalos summarized his discussion, asserting that the “religionist faculty members themselves, not atheists, recognize that it is not really demand that is behind their promotion of the study of the Bible in higher education, but rather *the loss of demand* that they feel must be reversed. If the demand for the Bible were to end, these scholars know that biblical studies, the source of their livelihood, would end.”⁹⁷

Avalos is right in so far as he went, and as far as secular institutions are concerned. But the demand for biblical studies in secular institutions has diminished and shifted to religiously oriented ones. Further, it is not only the faculty of religion departments, but also the administration and trustees of the institutions that sustain the department because of endowed funding. For example, just recently artist and activist Susan Shallcross Swartz and her husband, James R. Swartz donated \$10 million to Harvard Divinity School to establish the Susan Shallcross Swartz Endowment for Christian Studies, in support of new professorships, fellowships, and educational programs. Regardless of the ethics involved, the fact that demand exists for biblical studies indi-

⁹⁵ Page 297.

⁹⁶ Page 300.

⁹⁷ Page 302, italics his.

cates that a good number of people regard such studies to be of cultural and pragmatic value, contrary to Avalos' claim that it is irrelevant.

Chapter 8: The Society of Biblical Literature

In this chapter, Avalos found fault with the Society of Biblical Literature. He began by observing that attendees of such professional meetings passed by “dozens of destitute and homeless people” with little or no concern; he regarded this disregard as a metaphor that “there is little hint or hope that anything that ever was said in any session of the Society of Biblical Literature would make the world around it better.”⁹⁸ But this prejudicial metaphor falsely implies that the scholarly attendees at these tightly scheduled meetings have no personal concern for the needs of underprivileged people; although, it is likely that many attendees have greater concern for the socially disadvantaged than does Avalos. Actually he regarded the meetings of all professional societies as essentially the same, especially those in the humanities.

Brief History

On pages 309 through 311, Avalos provided a history of the Society of Biblical Literature, beginning with its origin in 1880 through to the present. He found fault with the paucity of women presidents and with the absence of “any openly atheistic or secular humanist presidents.”⁹⁹ He concluded; “The SBL is religionist to the core.”¹⁰⁰ However, what is more significant is that the SBL permits atheists and secular humanists like Avalos to be members and deliver papers. But why would a biblical society commit its leadership to anyone who regarded it as irrelevant and wanted it discontinued?

What Scholars Care About

On pages 311 through 312, Avalos accused SBL scholars of being less interested in Latino [his ethnicity] or disability studies than in studies more related to the Bible. He complained that “the disproportionate amount of attention to ancient objects ignores the rapidly changing demographics in America.”¹⁰¹ But it is not quite clear what the Bible has to do with contemporary population distribution other than that its teachings apply equally to all people everywhere. He concluded that “there is still more interest in ancient legendary characters than in masses of

⁹⁸ Page 307.

⁹⁹ Page 310.

¹⁰⁰ Page 311.

¹⁰¹ Page 312.

real people living all around biblical scholars today. Despite some efforts by the leadership to be ethnically inclusive, the SBL is still a very segregated society.”¹⁰² But as far as I know, SBL has no racial, ethnic, gender, or denominational restrictions on membership; it even accepts atheists like Avalos as members. How could it be less segregated? However, while scholars in general should care about these contemporary politically correct issues, shouldn’t biblical scholars primarily care for what the Bible says, how it is said, and what it means today?

The Journal of Biblical Literature

On pages 312 through 314, Avalos denigrated the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (JBL), the publishing arm of SBL. It publishes the scholarly research of the SBL members. Avalos criticized the journal of “androcentrism” because of the paucity of articles written by women. But this alleged disparity is not due to prejudice on the part of the journal’s editors, but because there are fewer women who choose to enter the field of religious studies. Regarding the journal’s content, Avalos asserted: “First, there is not much that is new to report. Second, unlike science journals, which might report new discoveries that will make a difference in human welfare, biblical studies journals often concentrate on minutia that will matter to no one but the scholars themselves.”¹⁰³ But regardless of the personal opinion of Avalos, JBL is relevant to its subscribers, which accounts for its 137 year history. No one subscribes to an irrelevant journal.

Scholars as Heroes

On page 315, Avalos chided the authors of scholarly journal articles as though they regarded themselves as heroes for solving some academic problem. He stated: “To some extent, such articles must be heroic narratives because they are partly generated by the demand for ‘excellence’ and competition for the precious few jobs available in biblical studies. . . . Very few of the articles will ever be read by those outside of the SBL or yield much benefit for anyone outside of the SBL”¹⁰⁴ Of course, this can be said of the articles in most scholarly journals; such journals are of interest only to scholars, not to the general public.

No Job for You

On pages 316 through 319, Avalos discussed the dearth in the number of academic positions available to graduates in the field of religious studies. Of course, I see no direct connection

¹⁰² Page 312.

¹⁰³ Page 312.

¹⁰⁴ Page 315.

of this problem with the SBL. While the SBL provides lists of potential employment opportunities, it provides no employment placement for any institution. In addition, the paucity of employment opportunities is not limited to religious studies, but it pervades the whole spectrum of academia. The over abundance of people with academic credentials is not caused by scholarly societies, but by the contemporary politically correct emphasis on the need for higher education and a corresponding reduction of academic standards.

The SBL Forum

On pages 319 through 321, Avalos discussed the SBL Forum where, in May of 2006, he published an essay summarizing the arguments of this book. His purpose was to learn what the counterarguments of the book would be. In this section, he responded to the three presumably most significant counterarguments: (1) “Counselors could help victims of Interpersonal Violence (IPV) see how the ‘misuse’ of the Bible has resulted in their abuse”; (2) “Since millions of people have the Bible as their sacred book . . . the Bible cannot be irrelevant”; (3) the demand for Bibles indicate its relevance.

In regard to the relevance of the Bible to psychological counseling, the response of Avalos is nitpicking ridicule. He said: “the argument assumes that the clients *need* biblical scholars to tell them to read just a few more verses. Why can’t the clients just read those verses for themselves?”¹⁰⁵ How ridiculous! Avalos completely ignores the fact that many people have personal problems they cannot resolve on their own, and that professionally trained counselors successfully help them, often using principles from the Bible as a means to that end. If it helps, it is relevant.

Regarding the demographic counterargument, Avalos responded: “It is not really ‘the Bible’ to which Christians are turning, but rather to a text that has been represented to readers as ‘the Bible’ by scholars.”¹⁰⁶ This claim, however, is based on his false conclusion in chapter one that “all biblical translations are illusions constructed by translators,” and his false conclusion in chapter two that biblical textual criticism has shown that it is impossible to reconstruct the original text. But it is evident that Avalos does not understand the scholarly discipline of linguistics and its subdiscipline translation, and that he does not understand the scholarly discipline of textual criticism, its methods, and the use of the available documented evidence. So people really do have the Bible as far as all practical considerations are concerned.

¹⁰⁵ Page 320, emphasis his.

¹⁰⁶ Page 320.

Avalos added: “if we went verse by verse, Christians are probably not reading or applying some 95 percent of all the verses in the Bible.” This may be true for some Christians, but not for many. But this is like saying the Constitution of the United States is irrelevant because few people read or understand it. The Bible is relevant to Christians because it is regarded as sacred and authoritative, regardless of how often or how thoroughly it is read.

Regarding the counterargument of demand, Avalos declared that “scholars are themselves creating the demand through marketing forces mediated by churches, academia, and a media-publishing complex.”¹⁰⁷ Again this is ridicule. Regarding a book of any kind, what author or what publisher does not want the public to buy it? Marketing is not wrong unless it is dishonest. Marketing makes a product known; however, people do not buy a product because of marketing, but because they believe it will provide a benefit relevant to their needs or desires.

Summary

On page 321, Avalos concluded his arguments against the relevance of the Society of Biblical Literature. He stated: “Basically, biblical scholars would like to be paid to read and write on subjects of enjoyment to them rather than on subjects that will help the world.” But this is prejudicial judgment of other people’s motives, and completely ignores the fact that the SBL functions very much like the scholarly societies of many other fields of study. In addition, Avalos asserted that “the Bible does not help the world except to keep alive a text that repeatedly is used as an authority for violence, racism, sexism, and the like.” Of course, this overlooks the fact that such *use* is actually *misuse*. Avalos totally overlooked the many hospitals and other culturally beneficial institutions found all over the world that were built and are maintained by Christians or Jews. I know of none provided by atheists.

Since Avalos was the editor of *the Journal for the Critical Study of Religion*, and the executive director of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion, I thought it would be informative to see what these organizations may have done to help the world. As it turned out, I could not find *the Journal for the Critical Study of Religion* on Google, and the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion was disbanded in 2010, according to Wikipedia. That’s what to expect of irrelevant institutions. Not so for the SBL, it has been alive and vital for 137 years!

¹⁰⁷ Page 320.

Chapter 9: The Media-Publishing Complex

In this chapter, Avalos discussed how he regarded the media-Publishing Complex to “help maintain the value of the Bible and biblical studies in the modern world.”¹⁰⁸ Included in this media-complex are the print media, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the film industry, and television.¹⁰⁹ He concluded that “the more popular part of the media-publishing complex is still engaged in fostering the illusion that religion and the Bible are valuable for the modern world.”¹¹⁰ But again Avalos is erroneously reasoning from cause to effect. Apart from *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the other media are mostly secular businesses seeking to make a profit by providing the general public with what they want to read or see. They do not create the demand for their product; they respond to the demand for it. Obviously, such businesses advertise; but advertising only makes their product known. People buy only what they regard to be relevant to their needs and desires.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this chapter Avalos provided his conclusion: “We have argued that whether [biblical scholars] intended it or not, their validation of the Bible as a text for the modern world serves to validate their own employment and relevance to the modern world.”¹¹¹ He then summarized his arguments presented in the previous nine chapters, which I have shown to be inadequate and unpersuasive. Strangely, he used the term *modern* in a self-contradictory fashion: “Modern human beings have existed for tens of thousands of years without the Bible.”¹¹² Finally, he presented three alternatives for the future of biblical studies:

1. Eliminate biblical studies completely from the modern world
2. Retain biblical studies as is, but admit that it is a religionist enterprise
3. Retain biblical studies, but redefine its purposes so that it is tasked with eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Page 326.

¹⁰⁹ I have not responded to his discussion of each media in this chapter because of unnecessary redundancy.

¹¹⁰ Page 334.

¹¹¹ Page 339.

¹¹² Page 341.

¹¹³ Page 341.

He stated: “I prefer the third option.” But this seems to contradict his initially stated purpose of the book: “For our purposes, we can summarize our plea to end biblical studies as we know it.”¹¹⁴ In my opinion the arguments of this book are faulty, having the appearance of propaganda rather than scholarship. Obviously, I do not recommend it.

James D. Price

January 2017.