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—DONALD P. GRAY

ON READING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Since 1971 the National Council on Religion and Public Education (Administrative Offices: Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, Dr. Daryl B. Adrian, Executive Director) has tried "to provide a forum and means for cooperation among organizations and institutions concerned with those ways of studying religion which are educationally appropriate and constitutionally acceptable to a secular program of public education." Several States have made it possible for teachers to be recognized in the area of teaching about religion, notably in social studies and literature curricula. Indiana University has been outstanding, under the leadership of James S. Ackerman and his associates, in preparing both teachers and materials for teaching the Bible as/in/and literature. Among the publications already available are Ackerman's *On Teaching the Bible as Literature* (English Curriculum Study Series), 1967; Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, ed., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives (The Bible in Literature Courses)*, 1974; and Roland Bartel, ed., *Biblical Images in Literature* (same series), 1975 (the last two books published by Abingdon Press).

This positive, constructive action has its critics. In the April twenty-third issue of the *National Catholic Reporter* F. W. Nichols reviewed the two latter books listed above. In his article "Biblical Images in Literature" the reviewer called the second work "a ragbag collection of snippets from here and there on biblical themes." A long article by John A. Miles, Jr. in the *Bulletin* of the Council on the Study of Religion, (June, 1976), "The Debut of the Bible as a Pagan Classic," asks whether there will be any difference in teaching the Bible as a classic like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, using Gilbert Highet's approach as a model. In the Summer 1975 issue of *Christianity and Literature*, Leland Ryken's lead essay, "Analyzing the Story of Abraham: Biblical Scholarship or Literary Criticism?" contrasts the methods of teaching the Bible as literature with the literary study of the Bible by biblical scholars.

It seems to me that many critics of the recent attempt to teach the Bible as/in/and literature are correct in their positions. It is true, to quote one, that "Teachers who know the Bible and who know literary criticism quite apart from biblical gimmickry are hard to come by and a serious business to train." I myself have witnessed efforts of teachers who know "literature" as taught in the schools, their knowledge stemming from a

few survey courses in college, and who have no training in any sort of biblical criticism. It seems dangerous to me. At its best, it may stimulate students to explore the *Bible* more thoroughly with competent teachers as guides. At its worst, it may confuse them into thinking they know something of the intention of the biblical writers when they have been subjected to a “literary” use of some biblical material.

On the other hand, there are teachers who have training in both literary criticism, and who have read widely and well, perhaps have written articles or stories or poems or verse themselves, and who, at the same time, have studied the Scriptures quite thoroughly. These ARE hard to come by. Some material like that from Indiana University, however, can afford insights of leads which they themselves have not come to.

Likewise, the training of teachers in literary criticism differs from that of teachers of biblical hermeneutics. This should be obvious. Collaboration (if needed or desired) is better than ridicule. There are different purposes and hence different approaches. Biblical literary criticism is not literary criticism in the humanities, as Leland Ryken points out so clearly in his essay in *Christianity and Literature*. The *Bible* can be studied, has been studied, endlessly by many people in many different ways. The “seminary” way is not the only way. The “ethical” way is not the only way. The articles and reviews of recent date make it appear that this point is not, after all, so obvious.

—MARIA ASSUNTA WERNER, C.S.C.

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