POSSIBILITIES AND PRIORITIES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

DAVID J.A. CLINES
The University of Sheffield

In January 1992, the Foundation for Theological and Religious Research in the Netherlands (STEGON, Stichting theologisch en godsdienstwetenschappelijk onderzoek in Nederland) organized a colloquium of Dutch scholars on the theme "Possibilities and Priorities of Theological Research in an International Perspective", and invited four scholars, three from outside the Netherlands, to present their reflections on the theme. Being one of those invited, but being no more a theologian than I am an exegete or a Hebraist or a historian or a literary critic, I spoke not of theological research in general but simply of my vision of the future of biblical studies, or rather, of Old Testament or Hebrew Bible studies.

At that very time, by coincidence, the firm of E.J. Brill in Leiden, not an hour away from the Stegon colloquium in Utrecht, was laying its plans for the launching in the following January of a new international journal in biblical interpretation, conscious perhaps not only of a market niche but also of the question of the internationalization of the scholarly communities it has served well for so long. Coincidentally also, this paper on possibilities and priorities came into the hands of the editors of Biblical Interpretation, and thence into the first issue of this new journal in which these very questions—priorities in biblical interpretation, and perhaps, indeed, its very possibility—will no doubt be vigorously debated.

Among the questions set out in the briefing document for the Stegon colloquium were the following (and the reader perhaps needs to know of them in order to follow the twists of the argument): 1. What obstacles do you see for the internationalization of theological research? Are they connected with general conditions in the scientific, cultural or political environment, or do they stem from a more specifically theological origin? To what extent is theological research thrown back on to the genius loci, i.e. the concrete context in which it is done? 2. What are the consequences of changing international relations, e.g. the contribution of the Third World, the changing
balance between East and West, the growing interchange with the USA? 3. If the study of religion with its suggestion of pluralism is the horizon within which any theological question is to be put nowadays, what are the consequences for the usual orientation of theological research towards one single religious and/or cultural tradition? 4. What are the growing points in your own field of theological research? What trends are developing in your own discipline, and what will be their impact on the other theological disciplines?

These are not questions biblical scholars are accustomed to being asked, or even asking ourselves. There was no relevant scholarly literature in the professional journals I could turn to for answers or suggestions, no biblical sub-discipline with a tradition of exploring the contexts in which our scholarly work is done, contexts that impinge more pressingly upon us, it seems, from year to year. So I found the task of addressing these questions challenging, but also frightening. My answers, I am afraid, are too impressionistic, too personal, too eccentric, even.

1. My Own Context

Because my specialism is Old Testament studies, and I teach in a department of biblical studies (without any adjoining departments of theology or religious studies), my horizon is necessarily somewhat limited, and I can speak most intelligently about biblical research in particular rather than about theological research in general. But because biblical research has traditionally been a quintessential part of the theological curriculum, I would be very surprised if what I can say about biblical studies in particular did not have its parallels in the broader field of theology generally.

Another determinative feature of my context is that I was educated in state-supported and secular universities (in Australia and England), and have always taught in such institutions, except for one year when I taught in a theological seminary in the USA. This context makes me more alert than many other biblical scholars (apparently) to issues of the impact of confessional standards upon biblical scholarship. It is a daily task for me—indeed, an hourly task in every class—to question the assumptions of most biblical scholarship: that is to say, that the kinds of scholarship we are engaged in are self-evidently worthwhile and necessary, that the kinds of questions we have been asking in the past still need to be asked, and that the kinds