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Original publication:

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In Retrospect: Farewell to the International Review of Biblical Studies

in: *International Review of Biblical Studies* 56 (2009-2010), pp. vii–xi

Leiden: Brill 2011

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Published in: *International Review of Biblical Studies/Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, volume 56 (2009-2010), pp. vii–xi.

In Retrospect Farewell to the *International Review of Biblical Studies*, 1952–2011

Bernhard Lang

Abstract: This note, by Bernhard Lang, tells the story of the *International Review of Biblical Studies* from its establishment in the early 1950s by Fridolin Stier in Tübingen, Germany, to its final volume, vol. 56:2009–2010. Lang transferred the IRBS office to the University of Paderborn in 1985 and edited IRBS from vol. 26 to vol. 56. He also comments on how the IRBS reflects changes in biblical scholarship, especially after the passing of the ‘great generation’ of biblical scholars between 1968 and 1979, a generation represented by Martin Noth, William F. Albright, Roland de Vaux, Gerhard von Rad, Rudolf Bultmann, and Joachim Jeremias.

For Eleonore Beck and Eugen Sitarz

The present volume – volume 56 of the entire series – is the last one to be published. Like all the volumes that were published during the past three decades, the manuscript for this one was produced at the University of Paderborn, Germany, at an editorial office staffed with one full-time assistant and funded by the university. With my retirement from the position of professor of Old Testament at Paderborn in the summer of 2011, the editorial office will be closed. Naturally, after more than thirty years of teaching, writing, producing each year between 500 and 1000 abstracts, and editing the *International Review of Biblical Studies*, I am looking forward to my retirement. And naturally, too, I regret not having found an academic institution willing to fund and continue IRBS.

While it is impossible (and presumably of little interest) to tell the story of IRBS in full, a few facts may nevertheless be mentioned. The most convenient way of doing so is to characterize the three periods into which its story naturally falls.

The Tübingen Years

The first period, from 1951 to 1985, covers the Tübingen years. Fridolin Stier, appointed in 1946 professor of Old Testament at the faculty of Catholic Theology in the University of Tübingen, felt the need for a periodical that would regularly inform about scholarly publications and their contents in all areas relating to biblical studies. With much enthusiasm and helped by his students, he founded the *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, subtitled ‘International Review of Biblical Studies – Revue internationale des études bibliques’.

The first fascicle was published in early 1952 by Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart. This first fascicle of 196 pages is remarkable in many ways: it was, internationally, the first periodical exclusively dedicated to publishing research abstracts in theology; it has the longest abstract ever to be included in IZBG/IRBS, an abstract of one and a half pages (IZBG 1:795); it uses Hebrew fonts; and it faithfully reflects the preoccupations biblical scholars then had – among others, the beginning of their fascination with the Dead Sea scrolls. One of the authors of papers on the scrolls abstracted in the very first fascicle is still alive – Geza

Vermes (author of a recent book abstracted in the present volume). The reception of IZBG was overwhelming. Harold Henry Rowley (1890–1969), then Britain’s leading Old Testament scholar and editor of an annual Old Testament *Book List*, published the following review of the first volume of IZBG:

This bibliographical publication is of the greatest value, particularly to supplement the *Book List*. It lists the titles of articles in the biblical field – in many cases adding a short abstract – in a classified arrangement. The work has been done by a group of scholars, Protestant as well as Catholic, and the number of journals and series whose articles are indexed runs to no less than 393. Altogether there are 1391 articles listed in this issue. To any scholar engaged in research this will be an indispensable tool. [. . .] The price is remarkably low. (H.H. Rowley, ed., *Eleven Years of Bible Bibliography*, Indian Hills, Col. 1957, 459–460; originally published in Rowley’s *Book List* 1953)

It soon became clear that the Katholisches Bibelwerk felt unable to publish IZBG regularly. Stier’s preface to the second fascicle betrays frustrating negotiations with prospective publishers. Fortunately, Patmos, a Catholic publishing house in Düsseldorf, stepped in and proved to be a reliable partner.

But finding a reliable publisher was only one of the many problems Stier had to deal with. Contributors had to be recruited – students and faculty willing to write abstracts without being paid for their job. And a financial basis had to be found for Eleonore Beck (b. 1926) who initially served as Stier’s unpaid head of the editorial office. The solution came in 1954, when Tübingen’s University Library made the following deal with Stier: you give us all the theological periodicals that you receive in exchange for copies of IZBG, and we, the university library, pay for your editorial assistant. Thus Ms Beck became a librarian whose only job was to see to the publication of IZBG. This arrangement lasted for many years. Beck headed the editorial office in Tübingen until her retirement in 1985. Stier left everything to her. Preoccupied with producing his own German translation of the New Testament (meant as a continuation of Martin Buber’s translation of the Hebrew Bible), he eventually came to contribute little himself. Luckily, Beck was well versed in biblical studies and had no difficulties to produce large numbers of abstracts herself. She found Eugen Sitarz, a Polish priest and scholar, also resident in Tübingen, to share much of the work with her in the 1970s and 1980s. The two were a splendid team – a multilingual Old Testament specialist associated with a New Testament scholar and editor of popular books promoting a modern Christian spirituality. Sitarz devised various strategies in order to make the volumes of IZBG available to theological libraries in countries behind what used to be termed the ‘iron curtain’. Without their annual copy of the IZBG, scholars living in Moscow and other eastern cities would have lost contact with scholarship originating in the west. Naturally, those initiated into the IZBG team (including myself from 1978) enjoyed the secrecy with which Father Sitarz went about smuggling books into eastern countries, ensuring that library sets of IZBG were complete even in inaccessible parts of the world.

Hardly had I been appointed professor of Ancient Judaism at the University of Tübingen’s faculty of Catholic theology, than Stier invited me to be his successor as the editor of IZBG. Stier, a man with long grey hair, thick glasses, and a slightly limp, did so in a manner memorable for its lack of ceremony: I had come to Beck’s house to pick up journals for abstracting. We sat down briefly, and Ms Beck asked me, on behalf of Professor Stier, how I would feel about becoming the editor of IZBG. Though taken aback, I must have said that I could see myself in this role, or something to this effect. She then called Professor Stier from his study (he lived in the same house, upstairs), we shook hands, I said yes to his question, and he wished me well, in order to disappear again. No sitting down for a chat, no contract signed, no laughter, no chinking of tea cups, no drinks or meal shared. And no witnesses other than Ms Beck and Father Sitarz. A matter of less than five minutes, and then I was in the street again, armed with a few issues of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* wrapped in a plastic bag. This was late one afternoon in February or March 1980, and I was thirty-three years old. I did not fully understand what was going on, and did not even note it in my diary. Only later did I become aware of the fact that Ms Beck was employed by the university and that she effectively had appointed me her boss. Worse, I had practically no idea what it meant to be the editor of a periodical. I had accepted the job of editor without knowing what was involved and how much time and energy I would have to invest for many years to come. But I was to remain faithful to my commitment for three decades of hard work. The first volume I edited is vol. 26:1979/80. Fridolin Stier passed away in 1981 (see the obituary in IZBG 27, p. V).

The Tübingen years of IZBG came to an end in 1984 with the retirement of Eleonore Beck, who had been the driving force behind IZBG for more than two decades. With her retirement, the University of Tübingen ended its support for IZBG. The last volume edited in Beck’s Tübingen office was vol. 30:1983/84, with 3360

abstracts. It began to dawn on me that I was to be the successor not of Stier, the editor, but of Beck, the abstractor.

The Paderborn Years

Then came the Paderborn years, 1985–2011. When I accepted the chair of Biblical Studies at the recently established University of Paderborn, Germany, I successfully negotiated for both office space (an extra editorial office and a room for storing periodicals) and an assistant's position in order to be able to continue production of the annual manuscript of IZBG. During most of the subsequent years, the editorial office was headed by Gerburgis Feld (who eventually became a Latin teacher), who was then followed, for shorter periods, by Ansgar Moenikes, Nele van Meeteren, Susanne Pramann, and Damian Lazarek. Patmos Verlag, Düsseldorf, continued to serve as the publisher of IZBG.

The move into a new, and differently staffed, editorial office brought the opportunity to introduce a number of changes in the format of the publication. Volume 33:1985 uses a revised system of classifying the abstracts, a system that continued, virtually unchanged, until the final volume of the set. Another change that I introduced was the increasing inclusion of abstracts of books, in addition to abstracts of periodical articles, so as to reflect advances in scholarship and scholarly debates more accurately. As a result, the annual volumes tended to increase in size; thus vol. 36:1988–1990 had 3401 abstracts. This size began to push our time management to its limits, and in subsequent volumes, we tried to stay closer to 2000 abstracts per year.

As in earlier volumes, three languages were used for the abstracts – German, English, and French, but I came to produce abstracts increasingly in English. This switch to English had to do with the tremendous scholarly output coming from English-speaking countries. Several times I travelled to Sheffield to make contact with the then flourishing Sheffield Academic Press which, despite its name, was the publisher specializing in exegetical journals and series of monographs in biblical studies. Even more frequently, I would attend the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in the United States and its legendary book exhibitions to make contact with American publishers who were willing to send books and journals for review. I also managed to persuade a number of journals – such as *Vetus Testamentum* and the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* – to add English abstracts to the papers they printed, abstracts that we could use for IZBG. I must add, though, that many published abstracts, while being helpful, often had to be revised or completely rewritten to present the results of research in a more focussed manner. An abstract that merely hints at a conclusion is worthless; abstracts must state arguments clearly and unambiguously.

In the year 2000, Brill – the famous Dutch publishing house – took IZBG over from Patmos, and so the Paderborn/Brill years (2000–2011) began. The old English subtitle – *International Review of Biblical Studies* – became the main title of the publication, but since nothing else changed, the numbering of the volumes continued as before. Naturally, the classification was now also given in English rather than as previously in German (or partially in Latin, as in the first few fascicles of IZBG where one can find headings such as 'interpretatio singulos libros et locos spectans'). During the Brill years, sales increased slightly, as did the number of books reviewed. Also over this period IRBS became increasingly affected by the digital revolution, reflected in the fact that from vol. 47:2000–2001 it includes a small section entitled 'digital media'.

A Chronicle of Biblical Studies, 1951–2011

The IZBG/IRBS can be seen as a faithful chronicle of the state and development of biblical scholarship in the six decades between 1951 and 2011. Certain aspects have hardly changed. In all volumes, you can find abstracts on matters relating to Hebrew and Greek philology. Throughout the volumes, a certain basic preference for the historical-critical approach is clearly visible. A mixture of modernism and conservatism is also present in all volumes; moderns often shift around the dates of biblical books and tend to believe in multiple literary layers within biblical writings, while the conservatives stay with traditional dates and few, if any, literary layers (to name but one example).

While this general situation remains fairly stable, some aspects of biblical studies have changed, even dramatically. During the past fifty years, Catholic biblical scholarship has improved tremendously in critical quality; it is no longer inferior to Protestant scholarship. It also no longer disseminates some of its results in Latin (the Latin periodical *Verbum Domini*, faithfully abstracted for IZBG, ceased to exist in 1969). Especially since the 1960s, biblical scholarship has become increasingly conscious of its methods, hence the increase in

the number of publications put in the rubric 'hermeneutics – methods'. Of course, there is a constant emergence of new brains and new ideas, readily discernable in every volume. However, in the decade between 1968 and 1979, one can see the end of what appears to have been a glorious generation of biblical scholarship. It was then that the leading specialists in the Old Testament passed away: Martin Noth died in 1968; Harold H. Rowley in 1969; William F. Albright, Roland de Vaux and Gerhard von Rad in 1971; Otto Eißfeldt in 1973; G. Ernest Wright and James Muilenburg in 1974; Johannes Pedersen in 1977; Artur Weiser and Walter Eichrodt in 1978; Leonhard Rost in 1979, to name just the most brilliant members of the guild. The passing of this generation's New Testament scholars is less marked, but still significant: Rudolf Bultmann died in 1976, and Joachim Jeremias in 1979. This generation had established a little defined, yet real consensus in all major questions of biblical history and interpretation. But toward the end of the 1970s, many scholars began to abandon some of the critical views dear to those scholars – for instance the notion that the Pentateuch is the product of four combined sources, of which the oldest is the work of the Yahwist, a writer active in the tenth century BCE. While the 'glorious generation' was dominated by German scholars, the subsequent generation saw the unprecedented emergent vitality of American scholarship. Under the leadership of American scholars the aims of biblical studies began to change. Until the 1960s, scholars mainly aimed at developing a 'biblical theology', but this aim has meanwhile received many rivals, often promoting contextual theologies – feminist, womanist, liberationist, postcolonial, and the like. Some contemporary scholars also feel that literature, rather than theology or history, is the proper or most relevant context in which to study biblical texts. As a result, biblical studies have become increasingly diverse.

Within this pluralistic situation, Old Testament studies in Germany increasingly became isolated and known for their focus on the 'source-critical' approach, with doctoral students typically discovering – or inventing – ever new textual layers in the Pentateuch and prophetic books of the Old Testament, and even in the book of Psalms (see the vivid portrait painted by Friedemann Golka in the article 'German Old Testament scholarship' in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden, London 1990). The most prominent exception to the German focus on source criticism was the school of Fribourg, Switzerland, where Othmar Keel led scholars in using the interpretation of the iconographic documents of the ancient Near East and Egypt to promote insight into the biblical world. In New Testament exegesis, the first post-war generation in Germany fell into two opposite camps, one siding with Rudolf Bultmann and his existentialist interpretation known as 'demythologizing', and one opposing this option in favour of more traditional Lutheran teachings. Eventually, this conflict disappeared, and a new generation was marked by the opposition between a minority of authors open to social-scientific approaches, led by Gerd Theißen in Heidelberg, and the more conservative majority intent on affirming the historical reliability of the gospels and the book of Acts, a school led by Martin Hengel. The prodigious output of Hengel and his school was challenging for IRBS, as Hengel, a model of Swabian application and industry, has 'written the maximum number of scholarly monographs and articles a mortal can produce' (S.E. Porter, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, London 2007, p. 156).

Naturally, someone who served as the editor of IZBG/IRBS from 1980 to 2011, and who during all these years has taught Old Testament exegesis – in the Universities of Tübingen, Mainz, and Paderborn, but also in Paris (Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne) and St. Andrews – is unlikely to remain a disinterested observer of biblical studies. Suffice it to say that having studied Catholic theology, Arabic, Egyptology and Assyriology in Tübingen and Münster, I was trained by some members of the 'glorious generation' – for instance by Roland de Vaux when studying at the Ecole biblique in Jerusalem in 1970/71. In my early days of teaching in 1977, I came to abandon that generation's notions of biblical theology and their fixation on a purely historical approach. My own biblical interpretation may be characterized as one giving priority to the history of religions and cultural history. My publications can be traced through the volumes of IZBG and IRBS (see the bibliography at the end of the present volume). In the pages of IRBS one can also find abstracts of two recent books in which I sum up my interpretation of the Old and New Testaments: *The Hebrew God: Portrait of an Ancient Deity* (2002; see IRBS 48:1729); and *Jesus der Hund. Leben und Lehre eines jüdischen Kynikers* (2010; abstracted in the present volume). While these two publications are clearly indebted to the post-1970s spirit, some of my earlier publications remain firmly within what was still the majority paradigm in the 1970s. The shift can be seen in the two editions of my doctoral dissertation, written on the wisdom poems in Proverbs 1–9. The original text of the dissertation, published in German in 1975, reflects the old consensus paradigm: *Frau Weisheit. Deutung einer biblischen Gestalt*. Its English edition, thoroughly revised, came out in 1986;

Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined represents one of my first attempts to abandon the old consensus model by arguing that until Persian times, ancient Israel's religion was largely polytheistic.

Farewell to IRBS

I have often been asked: why are you spending so much time on IRBS? It means working for others. You are not paid for it. It is a waste of time and energy. Do you want to be remembered as Mr. Abstract? I have pondered these arguments frequently, though hesitantly, knowing that 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:62). In retrospect, I do not regret having devoted much time – usually two to three full days per week, sometimes more – to IRBS. Intellectually, abstracting does pay, if only after a few years of intensive work. You get to know your field inside out. You develop a sense of quality, a notion of what is valuable and lasting, and what is ephemeral in scholarship. You will pick up certain ideas, some of them unconsciously. Some books and articles that you read, review and abstract enter your soul and bear multiple fruit, as has often happened to me. For all of this, I am grateful. But I am also grateful for being relieved of the daily burden of abstracting and editing: 'The snare is broken, and we have escaped' (Ps 124:7).

So let me conclude by bidding the *International Review of Biblical Studies* a fond farewell, and by thanking all the abstractors who have helped over the years to make it a useful tool of scholarship.

Bernhard Lang
Paderborn, September 2010
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