

Item #25 (History of the Propaedeutic Year)

This was Entry #24 in my previous website.

In mid-2007 Father Maurice Gilbert, S.J. who, at that time was writing the history of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in preparation for the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Institute on May 7, 2009, asked me to write a brief history “in about ten pages” of the beginnings of the Propaedeutic Year at the Biblical Institute. He said he wanted to make use of it to write his history. Then, some time later and much to my surprise, he informed me that he was going to publish my entire account as it stood in the history as a document from the archives of the Institute. He had officially entered my account into the archives. Needless to say, I felt honored by this decisions and gratified as well, for the establishment of the Propaedeutic Year and its guidance, officially and unofficially, for thirty-six years was at the heart of my life’s work at the Biblical Institute. Inasmuch as other institutions at Rome and elsewhere have found it useful to establish such programs, I think it may be useful to include the document in its entirety on my website. (Cf. Bibliography §218.) **(15 May 2009)**

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June 23, 2007

Some reflections

on the History of the “Propaedeutic Year”

at the Pontifical Biblical Institute

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One mild October evening in the autumn of 1963 Fr. Frank McCool, S.J. of the New York Province came to me during evening recreation (the U.S. contingent of the community used to walk up and down on the southern side of the cortile after supper, i.e., the side without a colonnade). He said there were some Africans who wanted to do the licentiate at the Biblical Institute but that they were weak in their Greek preparation. He asked me if I could help them. This was the beginning of the Greek half of the “Propaedeutic Year”, though at the time neither of us suspected it. Up until that point all the men who came to the Biblical Institute to do the licentiate in Scripture had had classical Greek. It was then just a matter of having a course in which the principal differences between classical Greek and New Testament were set out. Fr. Max Zerwick’s *Graecitas biblica* was based on this principle. But now we were beginning to get men (the first woman presented herself in 1965) who had had little or no Greek.

McCool knew I had taught Greek in the U.S. in high school, and this seemed to him an excellent preparation for helping beginners. He was exactly right. I had had two years of classical Greek in high school (Saint Louis University High School in St. Louis—I had wanted to take Spanish but my academic advisor changed that to Greek; we were then in the years before the invention of non-directive counseling), and then I had had Greek a bit in the novitiate at Florissant, Missouri, with two years of rather intensive Greek during my subsequent “Juniorate” at Florissant, taught by the unforgettable Francis A. Preuss, S.J., whose preparation included a classical tripos degree from Cambridge. During my teaching days as a Jesuit scholastic at Regis High School in Denver, Colorado, I taught Homeric Greek for three years. I was sufficiently prepared from the standpoint of my knowledge of Greek. But more important, I was sufficiently prepared from the standpoint of pedagogical method. Teaching high school boys for three years had been an invaluable dry run for what I was to do for thirty-six years at the Biblical Institute. (I have never fancied myself a professional classicist: my A.B. from Saint Louis University gave me a major in Greek and minors in Latin and philosophy, but I am innocent of graduate work in either language.) Nor have I ever thought it desirable—much less have I ever attempted—to produce professional Greek scholars at the Biblical Institute. This would have been impossible, and, in any case, not really necessary. From the very beginning I recognized that what was needed was enough Greek to be able to take the advanced course in Greek (now called “Greek A-B”), i.e., two semesters designed to enable the student to follow explanations of the professors and the arguments based on Greek used in scholarly books and articles.

From the very beginning I had the students write their names on file cards the day the course began. (I have kept all of them, from all thirty-six years.) From that first year, 1963-1964, I have cards for six students. Three of the cards bear the annotation “First semester only”, which implies that the course went for the entire year. The three apparently had had Greek and wanted just enough help in class to be able to be admitted officially to the advanced course. (Perhaps they had begun this advanced course in October along with my course.) My course concentrated on morphology and basic syntax.

For the academic year 1964-1965 I had eight students, though one quickly left the course. And two left at the semester. In 1965-1966 I had twenty-two students, of whom two were women. One left the Institute before finishing the licentiate, but the other, Maria Luisa Rigato, went on to obtain the licentiate at the Biblical Institute and a doctorate in Biblical Theology at the Gregorian University and has happily remained much in evidence at the Biblical Institute ever since she entered the Propaedeutic Year. As the numbers indicate, by the beginning of 1965 the Propaedeutic Year was a part of the academic landscape at the Institute. It was never a part of the official curriculum for the licentiate,

but more and more it became an unavoidable feature of the lives of an increasingly large number of students. A student could always avoid the Propaedeutic Year by taking the Qualifying Examination. I always encouraged students whom I thought qualified to take this route. But most were simply not prepared enough. Some came for a semester in order to freshen their previous knowledge of Greek, but more and more they had nothing to refresh and had to take the entire year.

I determined the material to be taught. It was not too difficult a choice. I took the paradigms of the grammar of Jay and made sure the students knew them well. Reading the text of the New Testament began with Day 1. By March we had finished the memory work of the paradigms and I chose two gospels, Mark and John, for reading in class.

In the United States I had found it advantageous to have the high school students answer a brief quiz on a daily basis. At the outset of my first year teaching Propaedeutic Greek in Rome I thought that this was an unnecessary discipline for mature students, so I did not resort to it. At the semester exam in January, however, I was dismayed by the low level of what the students had retained. From that time on the daily quiz (eventually it became standardized into seven questions) was a feature of everyday existence. For the year 1966-1967 I began the practice of keeping a record of the grades achieved by each student on every quiz. The grades of such quizzes were not used to calculate the official grade for the course, but they were useful for me and for the student to see just where the student stood in relation to his/her peers and to the subject matter of the course. I have all these records still, from thirty-three years.

There were normally four or five major examinations during the year. Grades were assigned for each semester. Students who failed a major examination could repeat it, of course, but a second repetition was granted only after consideration. In the course of my thirty-six years of teaching I was responsible for forty or fifty students leaving the Institute, usually on the grounds of insufficient ability in languages. I tried as best I could, circumstances permitting, to make sure that the student found a place at another ecclesiastical academy in Rome. Lack of language skill, of course, is not necessarily a sign of a lack of intelligence.

The system of exams which I found most to my liking was one initiated by Fr. Horacio Simian-Yofre, S.J. when he was Dean of the Biblical Faculty: the Propaedeutic Year was an entirely voluntary proposition, and all the examinations were voluntary. Only one thing was essential: the taking of the Qualifying Examination whenever the student felt prepared. At one stroke this removed all need for surveillance of the students, and the responsibility was put squarely on their shoulders. (During his mandate as Dean Fr. Simian-Yofre asked me if I wanted to teach Greek A-B. I replied that I thought I was doing more important

work right where I was, in the Propaedeutic Year. The material was not as challenging, but the students were more in need of individual attention. And since I was having qualified success in introducing them to the Biblical Institute, I preferred staying where I was.)

As principles in teaching I adopted two basic sets. One set involved the relation of the student to the teacher. In this set there were three principles: Exposition, Communication, Communion. Exposition involved setting forth as clearly as possible the fundamentals of the Greek morphology and of the Greek syntax of the New Testament. Communication involved making sure that this exposition found a place in the existence of the student. Communion was less tangible. It consists in the relation of the student to the teacher precisely as persons. It can be occasioned but not programmed. It involved an active *cura personalis* by the professor for each student that extended beyond the classroom. (A rather delicate matter, for one had to respect the student's privacy.) It was at this level that I had to decide if a student should be advised not to try to go on at the Institute. More frequently, it involved challenging the student. I recall one student in particular, who, after the first exam in November got a respectable grade in the mid-eighties. But I thought he could do a bit better and I told him so. He worked like a dog from then on and at the end of the year his grade was in the mid-nineties. Corresponding to this *cura personalis*, of course, was the reaction of the student towards the professor. With approximately 120 classes a year, the student had innumerable opportunities to size the professor up, as a student does in any classroom situation. On the whole I got along well with the majority of my students.

The other set of basic principles involved the way I set forth the material. Early on I set the norm that the goal of the student was to know all the details, not just in general but in particular. Repetition was the key here. It was made clear that the students must master everything in detail, and for the normal person that meant constant repetition. Then, in the final weeks of the course, the knowledge learned by rote the first three-fourths of the course had to be translated into ability to read the Greek text. The ultimate test of the success of the course was the pleasure which the student would take in reading the Greek of the New Testament. (I recall the first day of reading the text in my Hebrew class of 1974-1975. We reached the end of the period and I indicated that class was over, but a priest from Nigeria said he wanted to continue. He was so excited by his ability to read the text in the original language that he didn't want to stop. This, of course, was the ultimate goal I had in teaching both languages.)

In the late sixties Fr. Carlo Maria Martini, S.J. then Dean of the Biblical Faculty, asked me if I would assume the new role of Director of the Propaedeutic Year. The Director would be under the authority of the Dean, of course, but would be responsible for the supervision of the students in both Greek and Hebrew in the Propaedeutic courses. I

begged off on the grounds that I was not really capable. Looking back, I think I was too diffident of my own abilities which, by that time, had been honed by five or six years of teaching in the challenging international atmosphere of the Institute. Martini as a result kept the responsibility of such work to himself, but I now regret not accepting his request and lightening his workload. When I came back from my three years at Oxford and had resumed teaching the Greek Propaedeutic Year, Fr. José O'Callaghan, S.J. as Dean of the Biblical Faculty, asked me to act as Director and I accepted.

In the academic year 1972-1973 I came across a new grammar of introductory biblical Hebrew written by Thomas Lambdin. It immediately impressed me as an improvement on the grammar which we were using in the Hebrew Propaedeutic Course. That grammar, Weingreen, was quite good. But I felt that Lambdin would prove more satisfactory for our needs. I asked Fr. Luis Alonso Schökel, S.J. who was responsible for the teaching of the Hebrew in the Propaedeutic Year, if I could experiment during the coming academic year with eight students who would volunteer for a course taught in English by me using the new grammar of Lambdin. He agreed, and thus I began the academic year 1973-1974 with eight students who had volunteered. One left in the course of the year for personal reasons unrelated to the course, but the rest persevered. And all seven passed the final examination, which was administered by Fr. Alonso Schökel himself. The final examination in the Hebrew section of the Propaedeutic Year was a formidable thing, and justly feared by the students. But all seven passed. (To celebrate the end of the year they invited me to have supper with them in a sidewalk trattoria on the Viale San Gregorio VII. It was the very evening of the day on which the examination had been held: they chose that day so that none of them would be burdened with the realization that he or she had failed the exam. At that time about a third of the students failed the examination on the first try. I recall that one of the men was about to propose a toast at the end of the meal, but I interrupted, saying that the professor had the right to call for the toast. I then proposed a toast to the entire group, each member of which had passed the examination that morning. [Fr. Alonso was curious about the results, and had corrected the exams immediately.] For a moment there was the silence of disbelief, and then a tremendous shout of joy and relief. I am sure some of the passers-by were bemused by this show of exuberance by this strange assortment of foreigners [three Americans, a Canadian, a Thai, a Malaysian, and an Indian]. This was one of the undoubted high-points of my teaching at the level of the Propaedeutic Year.) The following academic year, 1974-1975, Lambdin was adopted as the grammar for the Propaedeutic Year, and I was assigned to teach the English-language section. Lambdin has been in use as the text ever since. But, having succeeded in introducing a more useful textbook, I retired from the Hebrew field of battle after the academic year 1974-1975 and continued in the teaching of Greek.

In the early years of the course Latin was the vehicle of communication. Then, in the early seventies, when it was clear that Latin was not going to continue as a viable vehicle of instruction, an attempt was made by some of us to introduce French as well as English as the common languages of the Institute. For a couple of years I tried to teach the same class using Latin, English and French. But when it was decided that Italian was going to replace Latin, the Propaedeutic Year switched to the practice of sections in Italian and English. (Soon a Spanish section was added to the menu for the Hebrew half of the Propaedeutic Year, but was never thought necessary for the Greek half: the number of students in the Hebrew section was always notably greater than that of the Greek section, and since a third section was deemed expedient because of the need to reduce the size of the classes, Spanish was chosen as the language to be used.)

For the early eighties I taught both sections of the Greek Propaedeutic Year, Italian and English, until administrative duties made the dropping of the Italian section advisable. (I was appointed Dean of the Biblical Faculty in 1986.)

With regard to my work as teacher in the Greek section of the Propaedeutic Year one more thing deserves mention. As the years went on I developed a system of mimeographed notes to help the students, a system which reached fairly definitive form in 1981. Around the year 1988 a Spanish priest presented himself as a student at the Institute and did remarkably well in the Qualifying Examination in Greek. When I asked him how he knew Greek so well he produced a picture of himself in the uniform of the Spanish army. He was on a high hill, and in the background was the Rock of Gibraltar. He was reading something. When I asked what he was reading he replied, "Your Greek notes". That was the final stimulus for putting my notes into printed form. Using a Macintosh I composed the first edition of my grammar, which was published in 1991. Unfortunately it had a plethora of typographical mistakes. I was able to redo the grammar and this second edition was published in 1998. Translations of the first or second edition have appeared in Italian, Ukraine, Korean, Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese. Other translations are contemplated. The reviews I have read were not too complimentary. A common complaint was that the grammar expected mastery of the language in far too much detail. All I can say in reply is that the grammar was written for the level of Greek mastery expected at the Biblical Institute. (Here may be a good place to remark that I do not think that the level of mastery of Greek now among the students of the Biblical Institute is as high as it was when I was a student, in the early sixties, and understandably so. It is simply impossible in the span of two years, even with an intensive Propaedeutic Year, to give the students anything like the four or five years of classical Greek we had when we arrived at the Institute. On the other hand, I think the level of the mastery of Hebrew is notably higher than it was when I was a student.)

During the course of these decades the Biblical Institute has been fortunate to have the assistance of a number of men and women for the teaching of Propaedeutic Year courses. Their names may be found in the *Acta* of the Institute.

I probably can be considered to be the Father of the Propaedeutic Year for the Greek half, while the late Fr. Alonso Schökel merits that title for the Hebrew half. Together with the late William Moran, in the late fifties Alonso began a program of “Lectio Cursiva” in Hebrew. This program, as I understand it, was based on Moran’s experience of Hebrew Lectio Cursiva under Professor William Foxwell Albright at Johns Hopkins in the United States, where Moran obtained a doctorate in Biblical studies before going on for a doctorate in ancient Near Eastern studies at the University of Chicago.

This sketch is not meant to gloss over the mistakes and false starts which have attended the Propaedeutic Year from its inception. But it does give in a general way an outline of what took place and why.

In the past forty-five years thousands of students have passed through the Propaedeutic Year, which they attended in whole or in part. Most of the students went on to achieve a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture, while some changed to other programs in Rome, usually ones involving Scripture. I personally have had about fifteen hundred students from eighty-five countries. For me it has been a unique experience. I can’t imagine a better assignment in the Society of Jesus, one which came to me without any seeking on my part. The level of the students here at the Institute is remarkably high—intellectually, academically, spiritually. Without these students and their loyal cooperation the Propaedeutic Year would never have achieved whatever success it has. **(15 May 2009) (Reviewed and retouched lightly 1 August 2019)**