

REVIEW

About competition for a “Professor” in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.4 Religion and Theology (Biblical Studies - New Testament), announced by Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen in State Gazette, no. 32 of 04/09/2024.

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Pavlin Petrov Sabev, PhD.
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Candidate for the announced competition:
Assoc. Prof. Teodor Bozhidarov Stoychev, Ph.D.
Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen,
Faculty of Humanities.

1. Information about the contest

The competition was announced in State Gazette No. 32 of 04.09.2024. The only candidate in the announced competition is Assoc. Prof. Teodor Bozhidarov Stoychev, PhD, lecturer in the Department of Theology at the Faculty of Humanities, Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen.

I participate in the composition of the scientific jury for this competition according to Order No. RD-16-089/05.07.2024 of the Rector of the Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen. At the first meeting of the Scientific Jury, held on 15.07.2024, I was assigned to prepare a review. Through the competition, I received a complete set of documents.

No violations committed. I do not establish plagiarism. The candidate participates with authored, original and contributing monographs, studies and articles that are in the field of the announced competition (Biblical Studies – New Testament) and were not used in a previous habilitation procedure.

2. Brief information about the candidate and fulfillment of the requirements for occupying the academic position.

To participate in the competition, the only candidate, Associate Professor Teodor Bozhidarov Stoychev, submitted documents. Associate Professor Stoychev is a biblical scholar in the field of New Testament biblical studies and a lecturer in the Department of Theology at Faculty of Humanities of Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen.

The candidate submitted the following works for participation in the competition: three monographs; four studies; two articles; a textbook. From the table attached in the document package, it can be seen that the candidate has met and exceeded the minimum national

requirements for a "Professor" in Field 2. Humanities, Professional Direction 2.4 Religion and Theology.

3. Brief description of the presented scientific works

Associate Professor Teodor Stoychev has submitted the following works for the current competition:

Three monographs: 1. *God Was Manifest In The Flesh*. Shumen, 2021 (Main habilitation thesis); 2. *Early Christian Identity: Questions and Challenges*. Shumen, 2024; *The Old Testament in the Light of the Archaeological Evidence*. Shumen, 2024.

The all three monographs were published by the University Publishing House Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, the editions have reviewers and scientific editing;

Five studies: 1. *The Heavenly Image of Jacob: Metaphor or reality*. – In: *Christianity and Culture*, issue 2. 2024; 2. *Orthodox Biblical Studies and the Historical-Critical Method*. – In: Dragutinovich, P. *The Interpretation of Scripture in the Orthodox Church: Incorporating Contextual Hermeneutics into Orthodox Biblical Studies*. Shumen, 2021; 3. *The Dialogue about Christ among Three Apostolic Fathers (Clement of Rome, the Didaché and Ignatius of Antioch on the Doctrine of Christ)*. – In: Ivanov, E., Naydenov, I. *Der heilige Methodius, Bulgarien und Europa. Festschrift anlässlich des 50. Methodius-Gedenktags in Ellwangen und des 10. Jahrestags der Gründung des Südosteuropäisch-Bulgarischen Kulturinstituts in Ellwangen*. Brill, 2023; 4. *History, Theology and Mission in the Epistles of St. Apostle Paul*. – In: *Christianity and Culture*, 2022, no. 8, pp. 100-116;

Two articles: 1. *The Conversation between the holy Apostles Paul and John the Theologian about the Person of the Savior*. – In: *Christianity and Culture*, no. 4, 2020, pp. 70-76; 2. *The Wearing of Headscarves according to the First Epistle to the Corinthians. 1 Cor. 11:2-16 in light of the socio-cultural context of the time*. – In: *Christianity and culture*, 2021, no. 161.

Studies and articles have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

Textbook: *An Introduction to the Holy Scripture of the New Testament*. Shumen, 2018.

Due to the limitations in the volume of the review, I will focus on the content of the monographs in general.

1. "God Was Manifest In The Flesh: Current Issues in New Testament Christology"

The introductory section discusses the various conceptions of monotheism that exist within the Jewish and Christian traditions. The author examines the terminology and definitions associated with monotheism, monolatry, and henotheism, paying attention to the historical and

theological aspects of these concepts. The various forms of monotheism in the Old Testament are also explored, as well as their reflection in the New Testament. Old Testament texts that allow for a polytheistic reading are analyzed, and the role of biblical personalities and heavenly beings who have a special status is examined. The author discusses how these texts and figures can be integrated into the concept of the divinity of Christ and how they contribute to the formation of early Christian Christology. Key New Testament texts that testify to the divinity of Jesus Christ are also presented. These texts include the hymns about Christ in the letters of the apostle Paul to the Philippians (Phil. 2:5-11) and Colossians (Col. 1:15-20), the prologue of the Gospel according to John, and other important passages of this gospel. The study of these texts unfolds over the next four chapters and includes literary analysis, genre identification, and interpretation of these texts, while also considering the various ways in which they present the divinity of Christ. The last sixth chapter, "The Conversation about Christ in Some of the Apostolic Fathers" examines Christology in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers St. Clement of Rome, the Shepherd of Hermas, and St. Ignatius of Antioch. Prof. Stoychev analyzes the different ways in which these early Christian authors present the divinity of Christ by examining the texts in the context of early Christian theology and practice. In the concluding part of the book, the author summarizes the main conclusions and emphasizes the importance of research on New Testament Christology for contemporary academic theology. The author calls for continued research and dialogue between different disciplines and approaches in order to reach a fuller understanding of the multi-layered nature of New Testament Christology.

2. Early Christian Identity: Questions and Challenges. Shumen, 2024.

The monograph examines the complex issue of identity in early Christianity, offering an analysis of the various aspects and factors that shaped this concept. The author begins by defining the term "identity", noting various aspects of its meaning, both in individual and community contexts. The first main section of the book, entitled "Christianities or Christianity?" asks whether early Christianity should be seen as a single movement or as a collection of different currents and groups. The author analyzes various theories and approaches that range from the view of a single and unchanging identity to the concept of pluralism and numerous local variations within the early Christian community. In the section "The Parting of the Ways", Stoychev focuses on the process of separation of Christianity from Judaism. He examines the historical and theological factors that led to this division, as well as the differing opinions of modern scholars regarding the time frames and nature of this process. Special attention is given to the role of the apostle Paul and his teaching in the context of the relationship between Christians of Jewish and Gentile origin.

The third major section, *The Church as the New People of God*, examines the concept of the Church as the new people of God, the successor of Israel. The author examines how the early Christians positioned themselves in relation to the Jewish tradition. The various ways in which the idea of a New Covenant and a new identity in Christ has been interpreted and applied are identified and analyzed.

In the concluding remarks, Prof. Stoychev emphasizes that the early Christian community should not be perceived as one of the many factions in the multi-faceted Judaism of that time, but as a qualitatively new community that builds typological connections between the writings of the Jews and their own books.

3. The Old Testament in the Light of the Archaeological Evidence. Shumen, 2024.

In the introductory part, the author shares that the choice of the topic is motivated by the desire to provide a new view of the theological content of the texts of the Old Testament, based on archaeology. Two types of chronology are presented: relative and absolute. Relative chronology follows archaeological eras, while absolute chronology seeks to relate those eras to historical events that can be dated.

The reigns of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon are discussed and how these periods correspond to historical events and archaeological findings. Archaeological and biblical texts are seen as independent evidence in the study of ancient Israelite society. Although the Old Testament contains descriptions of specific people and events, these descriptions, the author tells us, are interpreted through the lens of faith and the needs of society. In this regard, the Patriarchal era is of particular importance, as it sets the beginnings of Israel. Archaeological finds from the Early and Middle Bronze Age periods are used by the author to compare with the biblical narratives.

The possibilities for the historical reality of the Exodus as described in the Old Testament are examined. The opinions of scientists who accept or deny the historicity of these events are discussed. Various scenarios are explored for the Israelites' entry into Canaan. Archaeological evidence and biblical texts are compared to determine possible routes and methods of conquest of Canaan.

The period of the united monarchy under the reigns of David and Solomon is examined in the context of archaeological finds and historical evidence. The events and development of the Israelite and Judean kingdoms after the division of the monarchy are discussed. The period between the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the destruction of Jerusalem is again described through historical events and archaeological evidence.

The development of the Jewish religion is also outlined: the religious practices and beliefs of the Israelites during the various historical periods. Archaeological artifacts illuminate the religious practices of the Israelites and are presented in comparative analysis with the biblical narratives.

In the conclusion, the author emphasizes that "that the Old Testament narratives cannot be thought of as history in the sense that we today put into this kind of writing. The tales of the patriarchs, even if we assume that they bear faint echoes of oral tradition, are highly ideologized, bearing the marks of later editorial intervention." However, based on the archaeological artifacts, Prof. Stoychev believes that the evaluation of the Old Testament texts as historical documents should be in favor of their historical relevance, and the evolutionary hypotheses of a transition from polytheism to monotheism remain unconvincing. I would define this study as contributing and valuable to New Testament biblical studies, as it gives us a deeper insight into the etiology of the formation of Judaism as we know it from the pages of the New Testament.

Without neglecting the importance of Assoc. Prof. Stoychev's studies and articles, I will present their content in the next section of this review through the lens of the contributing nature of the methodology that is used to research specific issues in the field of the New Testament Studies.

4. Evaluation of the main scientific contributions of the candidate

Since the main habilitation work is the monograph "God Was Manifest In The Flesh", I will dwell in more detail on its contribution nature. I would boldly and without worry define the monograph of Assoc. Prof. Teodor Stoychev "God Was Manifest In The Flesh" as an event in Bulgarian biblical studies. Not only because no one dared to write such a work, but also because the author presented a different point of view to the problem. He offered his own synoptic reading of texts and boldly entered the wilds of the not yet well-known land of New Testament Christology.

What is so unknown, someone would ask, do we have the commentaries of the holy fathers, the philological and textual critical studies of the last 200 years? Can anything new be said here yet? Prof. Stoychev's monograph is proof that something different can still be said. To open a conversation - inspiring and courageously - about those difficult texts of the New Testament, on which different understandings of the unity of God and man in Christ are built.

The researcher of these texts faces at least three alternative methodologies. *The first* : the texts should be read through the prism of the terminology of the ecumenical councils (hypostasis, personality, usia, perichoresis, etc.). Such a reading would mislead us into thinking

that in a number of New Testament passages there is a systematic and consistent teaching about something. Father Theodore escaped this trap, although as an Orthodox priest he should have been caught by it. *The second* methodological alternative is based on the historical (social, religious, literary) context of the texts, and if we metaphorically present it again as a "trap", it clicks whenever we begin to comment on the New Testament through the methodology of historical criticism, seeking an explanation of unknown things through even less familiar. Prof. Teodor Stoychev has also overcome this trap, although as an academic teacher he is expected to be "caught" by it. The third alternative, resp. a "trap" we all unwittingly fall into is embedded in concepts of our time; handling a conceptual apparatus created centuries after the era of the New Testament - monotheism, ontology, Christology, sotirolgy, we try to describe the semantic polyvalence in the linguistic imagery of texts like Philip. 2:5-11. All these logics conceptualize spiritual knowledge, which ceases to be experiential in Revelation and becomes a well-ordered repository in which the concepts of things "rest." I think the colleague has coped with this challenge as well.

To avoid these "traps" you must first recognize them, and to recognize them requires wisdom, intuition and awareness. These three qualities are defining for the colleague's book. It is they who make it significant and valuable. For this book does not give us a complicated version of the catechism, nor a historical-critical wandering between the high and low Christology of liberal academic theology.

Prof. Stoychev's monograph tells us something very important: the language in which the faith and understanding of Christ in the New Testament is expressed is *an open, non-conceptual language*. Flexible, operating with images and means of expression from Old Testament texts (Word of Yahweh, Wisdom, Presence/Glory of Yahweh) dynamic, vibrant and deeply rooted in the liturgical life of the early Church. This language does not create a doctrine (as a system), it expresses (as far as the limits of language permit) Revelation; God Who is revealed in the flesh - He Who is - not what God is and how Christ who comes from Above is a man here Below. The analysis that the colleague offers of the New Testament hymns shows us the power of this perspective.

With academic sobriety, the genre specificity of the texts in Colossians, Philippians and the Prologue to the Gospel according to John is problematized. Can we define them as hymns? What are the linguistic and stylistic features that give us (or don't give us) reason for this? Here one can see the erudition of the author, his analytical and critical approach. The topic is unknown to our biblical studies and the analysis proposed by Prof. Stoychev is already a serious

contribution to the study of the New Testament in our country, especially since he does not uncritically follow those scholars who have studied the texts in question.

As a colleague who also works in the field of New Testament biblical studies, I believe that the work of Teodor Stoychev is a serious contribution to academic theology, and anyone who will continue to research this topic from here on will have to comply with the research to the colleague.

The significance of the remaining monographs, studies and articles submitted for the current procedure can be assessed through the prism of the methodology that Associate Professor Stoychev uses (such a perspective he set in his self-assessment and in the way he formulated his contributions). The method is *a historical critical study of the past* : a balanced use of historical-critical methods for new readings (there is always a need for new readings) of extra-biblical literary sources and archaeological artifacts. As in this case, by "balanced" we should understand a study of the biblical texts in their historical, social and literary context, not presupposed by previously constructed general ideas (philosophical, religious, social and cultural). Prof. Stoychev demonstrates a critical reading of existing methodologies and offers new approaches for a deeper understanding of complex theological and historical issues.

I highly rate "Introduction to the Holy Scripture of the New Testament" as an academic textbook that I recommend to students studying this discipline at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo. Without the excess characteristic of similar books, Assoc. Professor Stoychev's textbook gives a very good idea of the topics and discussions in modern biblical studies on the most significant isagogical problems of the New Testament books.

5. Critical notes and recommendations

I don't have critical remarks about the candidate's scientific works. If some of his historical-critical theses and methods with which he works seem too challenging in our conservative context, I would say - "so much the better", because this circumstance gives us an impulse for God-knowledge.

I recommend (I wish) Prof. Stoychev to implement his research and teaching experience also as a scientific supervisor of doctoral students, which will be beneficial for the next generations of academic biblical teachers.

6. Personal impressions of the candidate

I and Prof. Stoychev are academic teachers in the field of New Testament biblical studies. I can attest to his collegiality and academic integrity. These qualities are extremely

valuable to me, especially considering the fact that our research interests are quite similar and we often work in the same research field.

7. Conclusion

On the basis of the mentioned scientific contributions of the candidate, I believe that all the requirements and criteria of The Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the specific criteria of Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen have been met and I give a fully convinced positive assessment for the selection of Assoc. Prof. Teodor Stoychev for the academic position "Professor" in professional field 2.4 Religion and Theology (New Testament Studies).

I propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to support the candidate and to vote on a proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Humanities at Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen to elect Associate Professor PhD. Teodor Stoychev for the academic position of "Professor" in professional direction 2.4 Religion and Theology (Biblical Studies - New Testament).

15.08.2024



Assoc. Prof. Pavlin Sabev, PhD