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‘A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism’

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In: *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, 2022

DOI 10.1017/9781108859226.003

https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/new-cambridge-companion-to-biblical-interpretation/historical-critical-retrospective-on-historical-criticism/26B3B60304B21114A02284699345E367

To refer to or to cite this work, please use the citation to the published version:

Paul Michael Kurtz, ‘A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism,’ in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15–36.

A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism

*Paul Michael Kurtz**

"Kritik grew up on the lives of the Saints." – Lord Acton[1]

Many think critically of historical criticism. Fewer think historically about historical criticism. Though taken now for granted as the foundation of modern biblical studies, reading texts with an eye to their own history once threw Europe into panic. In 1795, the German philologist Friedrich August Wolf argued the great Homeric works were neither unified works nor by one man named Homer. The implications were clear to poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who penned,

> …Wolff's an atheist;
> And if the *Iliad* fell out, as he says,
> By mere fortuitous concourse of old songs,
> We'd guess as much, too, for the universe.[2]

Philology could have grave consequences for theology. So deep was the connection between biblical and classical learning, so taut the tie of ancient and modern worlds, so high the religious and political stakes, that challenging the unity of Homer – the Greek, pagan Homer – could be called an "Antichristian conspiracy" and likened to "a perverse attempt at explaining the world without a god."[3] If the apparent foundations of Western civilization crumbled, so too would the structures that rested upon them.

But the glories of ancient Greece were far from the only ones to fall – and to put both church and crown at risk of doing so as well. Wolf's approach was lupine, devouring all the textual piggies in its path. An ascendent mythological reading consumed ancient writings all

the more. Barthold Georg Niebuhr found unbelievable legends in the historical accounts of early Roman writers in his *Römische Geschichte* (*History of Rome*, 1811–12), leading the Oxford bishop Samuel Wilberforce to ask, "whether the human mind, which with Niebuhr has tasted blood in the slaughter of Livy, can be prevailed upon to abstain from falling next upon the Bible."[4] The human mind could not. If Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette looked to smaller units of tradition within in the Old Testament literature, David Friedrich Strauss, with *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*, 1835), dissected the Gospels into a collection of disparate stories. In *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 1883), an echo of Wolf's own *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (*Prolegomena to Homer*), Julius Wellhausen later judged Moses less a creator of than character in the Hebrew Bible. As one contemporary observed, "When scientific historical criticism reduced the annals of heroic Greece and of regal Rome to the level of fables; when the unity of authorship of the *Iliad* was successfully assailed by scientific literary criticism…it needed no prophetic gift to see that, sooner or later, the Jewish and the early Christian records would be treated in the same manner."[5] While medieval heroes were being raised in the nineteenth century – Arthur in England, Roland in France, Maerlant in Flanders, El Cid in Spain – ancient ones were being razed: Homer, Livy, Moses, Jesus. It was *Kritik* that toppled them.

In the predecessor to this volume, John Barton enumerated four features associated with 'historical criticism' – features defended by some and disparaged by others: genetic questions, original meaning, historical reconstructions, and disinterested scholarship.[6] Rather than describe these again, or defend them anew, this chapter considers how such aspects came to be central to biblical studies in the first place. From a historical perspective, it surveys the contingency, not inevitability, of this epistemic apparatus: the ideas and ideals, the tools and techniques, that were born of particular time and place and thus gave birth to – and continue to bear – particular kinds of knowledge. Indeed, if the long nineteenth century, from the French Revolution to First World War, was the age of history, it was also an epoch of texts: a

period of writing on the self, extending correspondence, expanding literacy, codifying laws, printing faster and cheaper, multiplying organs, collecting manuscripts, editing documents, producing reference works, founding archives, and recording stories.

Now, too, dawned the modern research university, with the reform of education, reconstitution of institutions, reorganization of disciplines, and restructuring of knowledge-infrastructure. From advances in media and technology to new constellations in politics, religion, and society, the present may have sometimes seemed uncertain, but the future often bright. Brighter still, though, was the past: in the ability of scholars to illumine it all the better, thanks to innovations in the science of texts. To trace the formation of a historical and a critical approach to processing written texts in the apparatus of contemporary biblical studies, this chapter first examines what criticism was. The inquiry then moves to where it came from, before proceeding to what it did and, in the fourth section, to critiques of criticism. In conclusion, the chapter suggests some prospects for future historical and literary study.

What* Kritik *comprised

That *Kritik* was critical, as in crucial, was obvious to Hermann Gunkel, scholar of the Testaments Old and New and self-proclaimed historian of 'biblical' religion. Writing in 1912, he cast it as the *sine qua non* of scholarship: "No criticism, no science; no biblical criticism, no biblical science."[7] He continued, on an etymological tack, "*Kritik*, that is, the art of judging, distinguishing, and separating is the fundamental activity of every scientific, especially historical, research." But for all its concern with precision, *Kritik* proved quite messy to define – and not just whether it was an art or science.

Criticism meant many things to many people in the nineteenth century. But to some, it was all: a mode of thinking, a way of reading, a sign of the scientific, and a means of setting foundations, be they national or cultural, secular or religious. As Steven Turner demonstrated in his classic essay, *Kritik* "meant everything and nothing and so derived its power from

suggestive imprecision."[8] Ultimately, it encompassed a skeptical assessment of authenticity and reliability of documents, a body of techniques for analyzing and recovering written texts, and a normative ethos entailing an honest, rigorous persona and intuitive insight. Based on her own incisive study, historian of science Lorraine Daston concludes, "The ideal critic was a chimera, fusing technical expertise, romantic inspiration, and the Protestant ethic."[9] Said criticism ascended across Europe at a time of dynamic change in politics and religion, in society and culture: from new forms of representation and mechanization to reforms of governance and institutions to consolidation of global networks and imperial pursuits. Yet this criticism – its ends and means, its self-evidence and self-confidence – cannot be understood without grasping the historical contingencies, the conditions of possibility and constraint, that gave it life, power, and authority.

The evolution of entries on *Kritik* in reference works indexes its exponential expansion of scope and import. It also acts as a control for understanding what practitioners thought then, as opposed to how protagonists or protesters now imagine it. At the start of the century, in 1809, the standard dictionary Brockhaus, with its slender 7-line entry, simply equated 'criticism' with judging or checking – as in the science of establishing correct reading of ancient writers – hence the philosophical endeavor embodied in Kant's 'critiques.' With the second printing, in 1815, the article swelled to 150 lines (more than 2.5 dense pages) and thereafter stayed rather stable. This version described specifically 'historical' criticism as diverse as the historical sciences themselves – though still concerned chiefly with testing and restoring the authenticity of written texts – with a modern and Teutonic dénouement: "It is primarily among the Germans in more recent times that this philological criticism has been brought to a very high degree of perfection. One admires the certainty of the results of our historical researchers and the resolution with which philological criticism has purified the classical literature for us."[10] The equation of this particular way of reading with Germanophones came early, and not only from Germans themselves. James Matthew

Thompson, of Magdalen College, Oxford, was neither the first nor the last who – as one satire later said – "Thought all that was not German, not germane."[11]

By the turn of the century, in 1902, the entry in *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (*Encyclopedia for Protestant Theology and Church*) filled over 27 pages, at 1,575 lines. Complete with 4 sections and 17 subsections, it went into fine detail on the history, value, types, techniques, and remit of *Kritik*. Here, the story of criticism – as studying the history of texts – commenced in ancient Greece, consolidated in the Reformation, and culminated among German Protestants, from 1800 onward, whose commitment to controlled, empirical analysis prevailed against theological dogmatism. But biblical criticism was something special, the entry argued, because its object was. Since the Old and New Testaments – as religious documents – constituted a distinct, coherent whole, they had their own kind of criticism: a biblical criticism that included source criticism, historical criticism, and religious criticism. If the Bible served as a witness to history, history itself then acted as a witness to God, equated here obliquely with 'religion': "Not the question of history but the question of religion, which makes itself known in history, secures for biblical criticism its target."[12] This sanitized, white-gloves description of textual study contrasted the encyclopedia's first edition, which did not shy away from the theological inheritance of *Kritik*. There, in 1857, the entry even analogized Bible to Incarnation, each with divine and human elements – some surpassing, others subject to *Kritik*.[13] Such a theological spirit – rather than be exorcised – was embodied in criticism: with its search for pure texts, inspired authors, original sources, faithful accounts, national or epochal spirits, and the transcendent in the immanent.

Criticism came in many kinds. Apart from its aesthetic and philosophical incarnations, the *Kritik* that aimed at textual history – as technique – took any number of forms. The basic bifurcation comprised higher or historical criticism (concerned with identifying dates, authors, and sources) and lower or diplomatic criticism (centered on establishing the primordial or earliest text possible). Although the theory held these two critical ventures as distinct, in

practice each impacted on the other. So too theoretically hermeneutics – that is, exegesis or interpretation – only entered the equation after the writing in question had been sifted and secured by criticism, but they affected each other when practiced. Working in tandem or, at times, in tension were other kinds of criticism, too: grammatical (to secure the meaning of language), tendency (to detect purpose and motivations), source or literary (to distinguish documents and determine their relations to one another), genre (to specify the conventions and expectations of a work, as part of a larger class of literature), form (to define the patterns of language that structure a text and trace its original social context), and tradition (to trace the transformation of a meme through different times and places, languages and cultures). Since the long nineteenth century, others have entered the critical toolbox of techniques, from rhetorical to redaction, canonical to narrative. Whatever criticism meant, or means, it became a means to many ends: to recover original documents, to advance a knowledge of the human past, to understand a (once) sacred scripture.

The historical and critical – whence and whither

As suggested by these reference entries, *Kritik* in nineteenth-century Europe was self-consciously old and new. Foreseeable for an era concerned with origins and worried about progress, scholars drew boundaries around fields and traced genealogies of workers, sketching their own labors as either innovative or incremental, depending on rhetorical expedience. When one major textbook, from 1878, hailed Lorenzo Valla "the father of biblical criticism," it placed the watershed in Renaissance humanism and the printing press: a turn away from past grammatical and lexical study and traditions of translation and exegesis – older practices that traced back through the medieval period to antiquity itself.[14] Yet even as they appreciated the erudition of their forebears, and lamented the learning lost since former days, other critics gave historical interest and critical reading a much more recent vintage, in the latter eighteenth century. True to its original title, *Von Reimarus bis Wrede* (*From Reimarus to Wrede*,

1906), Albert Schweitzer's famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* pronounced, "Before Reimarus no one had attempted to grasp the life of Jesus historically," praising his *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* – posthumously published in part by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing – as "one of the greatest events in the history of the critical spirit" and "a masterpiece of world literature."[15] Wilhelm Windelband, in his *Geschichte der Philosophie* (*History of Philosophy*, 1892), found a founder for historicizing criticism of the Bible in Johann Salomo Semler, himself inspired by the earlier Baruch Spinoza. Still others stayed in the final third of the eighteenth century but shifted from philosophers to orientalists in their accounts of criticism. An 1842 work on the New Testament marked "a new science" with Johann David Michaelis, as the discreetly historical, methodical study of literature, while a volume on the Old, from 1869, flagged Michaelis's student and successor Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, who reputedly coined the term 'higher criticism.'[16] Whatever the nodes selected or connections drawn, histories of scholarship were often – are often – written as the history of scholars; the history of criticism, as the history of critics. More incisive historiographically, however, is how those writers placed their own questions, practices, and arguments in relationship to the past: when they inserted themselves and where they described continuity or change – the work those histories were made to do and why.

A strong historiographical tradition has portrayed innovations of concept and technique as entering biblical interpretation from classical philology, almost unidirectionally: profane practices disrupting sacred study. For Edward Bouverie Pusey of Oxford, "scepticism as to Homer ushered in scepticism on the Old Testament," while for Ernest Renan of Paris, "The *prolegomena* to Homer by Wolff led of necessity to the *Life of Jesus* [by Strauss]."[17] As an essential contribution to the history of scholarship has shown, however, the fields of Homer and Moses, of Athens and Jerusalem, had long cross-pollinated.[18] Wolf modelled his work on Eichhorn's *Einleitung ins Alte Testament* (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1780–83), while Eichhorn himself had drawn on the classicist Christian Gottlob Heyne.

Such a reciprocity should occasion small surprise considering the number of theologians who had studied classical antiquity and the number of classicists who had come from pastors' households. True, Wolf did provide a compass for others to demarcate and navigate disciplinary topographies of their own. Across the century, moreover, classical philology continued to set the standard for what it meant to be scientific – creating a roadmap for Indic, Arabic, and Hebrew studies and for *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, or the science of Judaism. But the study of classical antiquity took as well as gave, with the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff later finding inspiration in the biblicist Wellhausen for treating sacred literature like any profane text.[19] In his *Einleitung in das Studium der alten Geschichte* (*Introduction to the Study of Ancient History*, 1895), Curt Wachsmuth went so far as to suggest there would have been no Wolf on Homer had it not been for source work on the Pentateuch.

Like the critical approach to processing texts, so the crises of historical thinking did not enter the corps of biblical interpreters as from a foreign body, as though a dynamic historical method had fractured static theological thought. Rather than a death of the author via Wolf or a cold, hard authentication of sources à la Leopold von Ranke, the challenges posed by historicism – from reliability to relativity – emerged as part of theological reflection itself. Continuing investigation into the longer hermeneutical separation of the biblical narrative and the factual realities behind them, Thomas Howard has built on work by the theorist of history Jörn Rüsen to assert it was hermeneutical and epistemological reorientations within Protestant theology and biblical exegesis that converged circa 1800 and drove historical thought into its various intellectual conundrums.[20] Howard traces "a radical shift in biblical criticism *toward history*, but history of another kind – namely, the history of the texts themselves and their authors/editors and no longer of the events and the people which the texts narrated."[21]

This conceptual move, from Bible as history to history behind Bible, created a structural problem for interpretation. If criticism – as practice, pursuit, and persona – united

ancient and medieval studies, it divided questions of the past from those of significance. Matters of history and matters of meaning diverged, with (portions of) the biblical text winning historical credibility or empirical facticity, as ancient records, but at the cost of losing religious value or normative directives, as meaningful sacred writings. Description of the past and prescription for the present proceeded to part ways. Where earlier exegesis had once embraced literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical meanings altogether, modern exegesis now placed the literal, i.e., historical, sense on a pedestal and laid the others low. However, study of the biblical past could become not anti- but sub-theological. Hermann Spieckermann describes 'the source,' accordingly, as an "ideological compensation for the dismissed claims of tradition and institutions," for once the scriptural canon was relativized historically, it was historical sources that gained canonical authority.[22] Sources served two ends: to fault past religion or to found a new, true one. Alongside a historicization of theological thinking came a theologization of historical reading.

Yet writing on such readings carried risks. Back in the 1600s, Richard Simon may have drawn fire for casting doubt on Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, but certain statements still proved dangerous even at the turn of the twentieth century. Charges of heresy revealed the stakes in countering claims advanced in or about the Bible. Most notable, perhaps, was *Essays and Reviews* (1860), whose reviewer, mentioned earlier, had smelled Livy's blood in the water. Exciting a controversy in Britain which even overshadowed that of Darwin's *Origins of Species* (1859), the book, a collection by seven liberal Anglicans, challenged traditional teaching: such as Rowland Williams's essay on research into the credibility of stories about Egypt, predictive nature of prophecy, and chronology of the Gospels.[23] Two contributors wound up in ecclesiastical (then secular), and another in chancellery, court. Shortly thereafter, the Colenso Affair saw the Bishop of Natal summoned to a tribunal for his forensic investigation into composition history of the Hebrew Bible and into reports – especially numerical details – that strained plausibility, not to mention his other theological

positions. Twenty years later, in Scotland, William Robertson Smith also went to trial in the Free Church for his statements on the Bible – not least Deuteronomy being neither early nor by Moses. A decade onward, in the 1890s, Charles Augustus Briggs (of the Hebrew lexicon BDB, or Brown-Driver-Briggs) was tried in the Presbytery of New York for arguing, among other things, against the prophet Isaiah as author of all the biblical texts that bear his name. But Protestants were not the only ones to encounter problems from their textual solutions. Amidst the so-called modernist crisis in Catholicism, Alfred Loisy of Paris communicated his findings on change in early Christian thought and literature, only to find himself excommunicated. Criticism could still be criticized when it ventured too far into the domain of history that theology held dear.

What Kritik accomplished

If historical criticism ended up in court, it had long been in school. Following the Göttingen school of history, in the second half of the eighteenth century, which set in motion the principles of historicism and organization of the modern research university, the Berlin school of history embodied historical study in the first half of the nineteenth, prizing skepticism, praising individuality, and prioritizing documentation.[24] Looking back to the rise of historical science in Germany, Lord Acton had it right when he wrote, in the first issue of the *English Historical Review*, "It was their belief that literature had long been an arduous and comprehensive conspiracy against truth, and that much envenomed controversy could be set at rest by exposing the manifold arts that veil substantial falsehood – suppression, distortion, interpolation, forgery, legend, myth."[25] Most iconic for biblical study was the Tübingen School of the 1830s and 1840s. Guided by Hegelian philosophy and driven by the fashionable study of myth, representatives like Ferdinand Christian Baur and Strauss read early Christian literature against the grain, and often against Judaism, as they offered new accounts of Christian origins and distinguished Jewish (Petrine) and Gentile (Pauline) Christianity.[26]

Another was the History of Religion School (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) at the *fin de siècle*, a loose network of former Göttingen researchers deeply interested in the history of Christianity – as a religion, as part of ancient culture, as a product of Judaism – yet equally committed to the superiority of the Christian faith, nay, the liberal Protestant confession. Comparing religions both ancient and modern and bringing into the equation other peoples of antiquity, these scholars placed on the scholarly agenda increasingly fashionable questions of the psychological, the anthropological, and the social.

But schools are more than students and teachers. They depend on stimulus and sponsorship, on space and esprit de corps. The *Seminar* became an essential knowledge-infrastructure in the nineteenth century, uniting teaching and research while dividing specialisms.[27] Initiated for classical studies at Göttingen, implemented by other fields likes physics and mathematics, and introduced to universities all over, from Russia to Greece, North America to Scandinavia, this small-group arrangement comprised masters and apprentices – with a crop of (elite, male) recruits both steady and select – and consisted of a pedagogy oriented toward specialist training exercises and original contributions (as opposed to the traditional lecture), incentivized with regular prizes. Dedicated workrooms, subject libraries, in-house publications, and artifact collections also constituted the *Seminar*, or institute. In this way, learning to read and write in a particular fashion made up only part of "the philologic-industrial complex."[28]

The consolidation and perpetuation of such local, yet interlocked, communities – and the broader domination of an historically oriented, critical approach to written texts – depended on an institutionalization of several innovations, under heavy state support. They included a systematic organization of large-scale, long-term collaborative research projects, careers based more and more on merit and less and less on class and confession, and the restriction of hypothesis and refutation to evidence and argumentation.[29] Writing on classical scholarship, Frank Turner has contended, "It is fundamental to understanding the Homeric

question as a nineteenth-century phenomenon to realize that it was philology and philological careerism rather than concern for Homer that fueled the Question."[30] As with the Homeric Question, so with the Synoptic Q or Pentateuchal sources: "in large measure as much a quarrel about arguments as it was a dispute over Homer." As they disciplined and credentialed aspiring experts, these structures instilled a particular set of scholarly values and ideals, qualities and emotions.[31] Such changes conditioned and confined the questions asked, the methods implemented, the answers offered, and the consensus built in research on textual artifacts. Networks across disciplines, institutions, and states may have forged alliances and formed rivalries of all kinds, but 'criticism' – in all its productive ambiguity – became a chief component in the regime of knowledge-production that, despite great diversity, defined what it meant to be scientific, modern, and à la mode.

Whether higher or lower, criticism produced standard scholarly protocols for processing texts, be they ancient or medieval. Much of this critical activity operated in the service of textual editing – from manuscripts to inscriptions, from chronicle to archival – in massive collaborative undertakings like the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. *Kritik*'s techniques became universal, applicable to writings no matter their diversity in language, culture, or genre, in their chronology, geography, or materiality.[32] It sought to conquer the human past and do so by commanding the history of texts, with close attention to linguistic and literary variation. In the first half of the century, Karl Otfried Müller, with a *Prolegomena* of his own that echoed those of Wolf and Kant, studied language to extract historical information from Greek myth, while George Grote separated legendary Greece from historical Greece. If Abraham Geiger detected the biblical and rabbinical material incorporated into the quranic literature, Gustav Weil inspected the suras chronologically to order their periods of development. In like manner, the Sanskritist Christian Lassen broke down constituent parts of the Mahabharata, and Karl Müllenhoff discerned Christian adaptations to pagan Anglo-Saxon works. With this technical expertise, a single scholar could move from one set of data to

another. Karl Lachmann, whose work on Homer caused such a stir, performed the same operation to reconstruct the *Nibelungenlied* (Middle High German), New Testament (Koine Greek), and Lucretius (classical Latin). Theodor Nöldeke, too, separated sources in the Pentateuch, Quran, and Alexander Romance. As a genre, the 'historical-critical introduction' came into fashion, with books dedicated – according to their very titles – to ancient Latin authors, the Greek orator Demosthenes, New Testament, Old Testament, Quran, *Poenitentiale Romanum*, and Augsburg Confession as well as *Nathan the Wise* and *Minna von Barnheim* by Lessing and the philosophy of the unconscious and philosophy of mythology.

This ultrahistorical scrutiny of language, works, and documents was by no means confined to – or, for a time, even uncontroversial in – the German-speaking lands of Central Europe during the long nineteenth century. In an edition of the medieval chronicler Nestor (1802–05), August Ludwig von Schlözer was at pains to insist he was only applying to Russian history the principles already established in other nations, not to mention the rules always expounded by biblical and classical scholars. Over in Georgian Britain, as Elinor Shaffer noted some time ago, "the principles on which Strauss worked had already been evolved by 1795, and they were fully incorporated into Coleridge's own thought."[33] Likewise, it was in the Low Countries that Abraham Kuenen decidedly differentiated writings within the Hebrew Bible, as the stemmatology of Lachmann (and Jacob Bernays) gained firm traction for textual editing in French medieval studies – at least until the Franco-Prussian war in 1870–71 – and managed to maintain that grip in Italian scholarship as well. After their tours of Teutonic universities at the *fin de siècle*, Charles Seignobos, of France, and Paul Frédéricq, of Belgium, both found much to envy and emulate – if also emend – in the methods and the structures of German historical training. As the president of the American Historical Association stated, in 1890, "The modern scientific study of history everywhere has a tap-root running down into philology."[34]

Kritik*'s critiques*

If historical criticism did not come apart from history, neither did it go without critique. Contemporaries saw promise and peril alike in its conclusions and its consequences. As a way of reading texts, it was judged, by turns, inordinately and insufficiently religious. Some considered historicizing criticism counter-theological. Apart from more spectacular conflicts like heresy trials, de Wette was dismissed from his professorship in Berlin, and Strauss impeded from taking one in Zurich, precisely because of a threat to orthodox positions. Such conflict turned into trench warfare with de Wette's ultimate successor, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, whose control extended beyond the Berlin theological faculty and whose *Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung* (*Protestant Ecclesiastical Journal*) obstructed newfangled histories of Israel and reassignments of authorship in the Hebrew Bible.

Yet other critics judged its chief representatives crypto-theological. None other than Niebuhr, slayer of Livy, drew a stark contrast between a lesser 'theological' and his own 'philological' approach to the past, advocating for a proper ancient history that did not focus narrowly and teleologically on a biblical story and biblical people. Just as Renan called Strauss a typical German theologian of Hegelian bent, his a "book of theology, a book of sacred exegesis," so too Max Weber, in his *Ancient Judaism*, later discerned "religiously determined" presuppositions in another apparent radical, Wellhausen. Likewise, Jewish intellectuals, including respected philologists, detected a clear anti-Jewish bias baked into the historico-critical cake. Benno Jacob spoke of age-old apologetics and polemics at work in Protestant textual analysis, declaring, "Biblical criticism is the prodigal son of Christian theology," while Solomon Schechter, as president of Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was even more outspoken against a criticism criticizing Judaism, famously so with his 1903 speech "Higher Criticism – Higher Anti-Semitism."[35] Depending on the commentator, historical criticism could thus be either overly historical and underly religious or excessively theological and exiguously critical.

No less than religion, though perhaps less discussed, politics was implicated in biblical criticism, too. Like Wolf's work on Homer – compared to "specious revolutionary doctrines" in the Old Regime – so doubts in *The Life of Jesus* about the King of Kings were seen by some as ushering in doubts about the kings of Europe, given "the pantheistic and the republican implications of Strauss's anti-hierarchical, democratic insistence on the divinity of all humanity."[36] Whereas such radically historical readings may have seemed threatening in the early decades of the century, by the second half they became standard, even stuffy. In 1895, Gunkel referred to focused literary analysis as mere grunt work: unavoidable yet unexciting preparatory labor. New social and political alignments helped move liberal theology, with its modes of textual processing, from marginal to mainstream, from danger to drudgery. Fostering an aversion to visions of a Catholic state, with its clerical hierarchy and rule from Rome, and of an orthodox Lutheran one, with its landed gentry, conservative aristocrats, and traditional officers, this cultural Protestantism cultivated an affinity for middle-class concerns like unencumbered individualism, educational progress, constitutional reform, and free-market economics.[37] As Jon Levenson has argued, "historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political idea. It is the realization of the Enlightenment project in the realm of biblical scholarship."[38] Or, as Renan said, "The modern spirit, that is, rationalism, criticism, liberalism, was founded on the same day that philology was founded. *The founders of the modern spirit are the philologists*."[39]

Such ideals, unsurprisingly, found support in the finds of scholars, rendering both past precedent and narrative structure to values of the bourgeoisie, be it a free, self-regulating individual or a privatized, internalized, ethicized, and depoliticized religious affiliation. Simon Goldhill has therefore emphasized how this age of life-writing – of autobiography and national biography, of correspondence and diaries, of the genre *Life and Letters* – was inextricable from a new sense of self-expression.[40] With that redefinition of the present self came an obsession with 'the historicals', with inspired individuals of the past: from Moses to

Muhammad, David to the Son of David. Changes in modern technology and media, too, brought with them a shift in understandings of ancient authorship and ownership, of composition and textual stability.

The past-minded scrutiny of literary materials was infused with present values for the collective on things political, social, and cultural. Questions of cultural patrimony came at a time of editing cultural heroes and epics, of endowing state libraries and archives. Indeed, the nineteenth century was an age not only of history but also of national history, of the rise and demise of peoples great and small, ancient and modern. Writings on Jewish antiquity provided no exception. In lectures delivered at the University of Berlin during the 1820s, Heinrich Leo looked to "history as the teacher of politics" and deemed the ancient Jewish state, which he perceived to be a polity ruled by priests, as "an example of how no other people should live."[41] Later, in the 1880s, the Earl of Dalhousie wrote to scholars of Greek and Hebrew across Europe to collect opinions as to whether biblical law would permit marriage with a deceased wife's sister, hoping to bolster support for a bill he introduced to the House of Lords – this a century after Michaelis had divested the Hebrew Bible of legal, civic, and moral normativity for modern nations. About the same time, an article in *Encyclopædia Britannica* ended with an invocation of Spinoza to draw a straight line – approvingly – from Jewish emancipation to the extinction of Judaism: an odd ending to an entry otherwise sharply focused on the history of Israel, by Wellhausen (also approached by Dalhousie).

Indeed, the stakes in Jewish antiquity for modern Judaism had long been obvious, especially to Geiger, whose articles in his own *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* (*Scientific Journal for Jewish Theology*) highlighted a bias against Judaism in the "two heroes of biblical criticism" Michaelis and Eichhorn (1835) and in the Hegelian New Testament critic Bruno Bauer (1844). However, studies on ancient Jewish writings pushed beyond external political arrangements. Much work, be it literary, linguistic, or historical, pressed the inquiry into some deeper spirit, national character, or even essence of the Jewish people, which

allegedly explained their fate in past and present. Towards the end of the century, such inquiries could take a sharp ethnological and, later, even biological turn: most blatantly, and balefully, in the thesis of an Aryan Jesus.[42] As ever, writing on the past was very much about the present, on the other very much about the self. Such questions were inseparable from others, like what it meant to be modern or European, to be Jewish or Christian.

From Retrospect to Prospect

"German historical science of the last thirty years was, in its entire character, national and Protestant," wrote Karl Hillebrand in his review of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (*Unfashionable Meditations*), in 1874.[43] This claim strikes at a key feature of intellectual culture in much of nineteenth-century Europe and North America. From anthropologists like Talal Asad to historians like Rebekka Habermas, contemporary scholars have reevaluated the boundaries between secular and religious, seeing them not as oppositional but relational, not as fixed but fluid. In this formative period of biblical studies, as German science laid so many foundations, distinctly Protestant questions and concepts, persons and personae, institutions and interpretations were construed as neutral forms for creating and processing textual data.[44] These structuring mechanisms, learned practices, and epistemological guides defined what kind of knowledge was worth knowing – and not – and which fields belonged together. So it was that *one* particular confessional, national, and situated way of reading morphed, discursively, into *the* general secular, universal, and scientific method of analysis. Yet the quest for uncorrupted writings, the dismissal of interpretative guidance from transmitted authorities, and the target of authentic, factual events of the past were not always and everywhere important. As the historian Heinrich Graetz suggested in *The Jewish Chronicle*, "Christianity possesses a uniform set of literary sources from the Gospels to Revelations (*sic!*). If a single of these is proved unhistorical, the remainder fall to pieces."[45] Not

everyone needed, or wanted, a minimally mediated contact with the ancient past, as promised by especial operations and ingrained intuition.

If the liberal Protestant became identified with the unmarked secular, it did so in express contrast to other (af)filiations. About forty years after Hillebrand, one Jewish commentator put a finer point on the proposition when he described biblical criticism as a "hatred of Israel [which] has dressed itself in scientific guise."[46] Indeed, countless statements in pamphlets and lectures as in commentaries, histories, and reviews pushed Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, both orthodox and free, out into the unscientific wilderness – as confessional and medieval, unhistorical and uncritical. The ever-acerbic Heinrich Ewald only said what others were thinking as he stated that Catholicism – precisely because of its tradition – "neither has nor can have a true scholarship whatsoever."[47] Gunkel, too, insisted, in a letter as late as 1912, "Most of our Jewish scholars have not yet experienced even the Renaissance! Instead, the fact is that Protestantism is still the only denomination in which the academic spirit is truly possible."[48] Women hardly entered the conversation, as topics or discussants. This equation of the particularly Protestant with the generally scientific continues to find reflection in the stories the discipline of biblical studies tells about itself. After 1800, few Jews and Catholics appear in the standard histories of biblical scholarship, which says more about the present than it does the past.

Historical-critical inquiry – as an assortment of techniques, a conventional set of questions – seems, at times, unglued: less in the sense of failure or confusion (though that may be true, too) than the weakened bonding power of the hyphen. Just how historical is a critical approach, and just how critical is a historical approach? Other areas of ancient, medieval, and modern studies often make a basic distinction, in interest and undertaking, between 'literature' and 'history' people – a useful if uncommon one among biblical scholars. No longer are the historical and the critical coterminous, with much study of the past being non-literary and much study of literature being non-historical. Of course, the relationship between historical

and literary analysis has long occupied a place in the discourse of philology itself, as *Sachphilologie* (philology of things) or *Wortphilologie* (philology of words). Similar stances emerge in discussions to prioritize either narrow internal evidence or wide external data, be it from historical comparanda, archaeological discoveries, or anthropological observations.

Yet the difference between past-driven and text-driven research agendas remains an important distinction, whether one studies texts to understand the past or studies the past to understand texts. Given his equation of biblical science and historical science, Gunkel would no doubt be dismayed at the distance between them. Work by biblical scholars rarely appears in the leading journals of history, nor does it feature with any frequency in the finest journals of literature and culture. Once an enviable leader, biblical scholarship now follows more often than not, less a giver than a taker among humanistic disciplines. The waters of historical criticism, which swept over (and up) the human sciences, have receded, leaving behind pools in certain fields – albeit pools behind the gates of prestigious universities and the walls of establishment journals, bastions that defend a specific notion of serious scholarship and define a specific idea of knowledge worthwhile. A universal approach has, in many ways, become provincial. An insistence on doing what has always been done might mean biblical scholarship has less and less, not more and more, to say to other humanistic disciplines.

Has historical criticism had its day? Such concern was coming already 150 years ago: "The crisis is undeniable. The historical skill of Germany is still the first in the world, but it is wasted upon infinitesimal concerns," with worries about the study of history becoming "petrified into criticism of texts."[49] Undoubtedly, such historical and critical investigation has taught us much about the past, its cultural productions, and the communities that preserve them, for biblical as for other traditions. But we may have reached the point of diminishing returns, especially without an influx of new data on par with those from Elephantine, Ugarit, Qumran, or Al-Yahudu. With the humanities in general and biblical studies in particular on a wobbling back foot, one might reasonably ask whether ever scanter resources – human and

material – are best spent posing the same questions framed in the same way for the same body of literature and chasing them down the same paths to find the same conclusions as could have been done (was done) over the last two centuries. The theological freight, the unrecognized or unconfronted baggage, weighing down on the historical-critical quest makes that foot all the more unstable. Considering the history of source analysis, Glenn Most has argued, "In the end, what is perhaps most surprising is that *Quellenforschung* lasted as long as it did. Its survival was assisted by a combination of inertia, corporate solidarity, methodological naïvité, a concentration upon individual results rather than upon general premises, and the seductive paradigm of Lachmann's method."[50]

So much of what biblical scholars know and do depends on the results of historical criticism and the epistemic apparatus of its heyday. These rigors have become *de rigueur*, for what defines and qualifies certain modalities of reading as scholarly: an emphasis on expertise in language, knowledge of literature, competence in codicology, and proficiency in papyrology, and adroitness in antiquity. Not least for this reason, practitioners must understand it in principle and practice to understand themselves: their problems, their assumptions, their concepts, their techniques. Yet it may be time to switch from the historico-critical horse, which – as bestrode in many places – has carried us about as far as it can go: so we can ride on to new horizons, new outlooks, new possibilities. A real hunger for the past, for the historical, might find fuller nourishment by foraging in other fields of history, while a true thirst for texts, for the critical, could be quenched by drawing from other areas of literary theory and codicology.

Historical criticism lived some of its finest days in the biblical texts. And biblical studies saw its glory years in the age of historical criticism, as the envy of and model for so many other humanistic fields. However, clinging to historical-critical inquiry as the whole or highest means of knowledge might not look unlike those who tried to hold onto Homer after Wolf – or Jesus after Strauss.

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Endnotes

* For discussions that shaped this essay, my gratitude goes to James Aitken, Simon Goldhill, Nathan MacDonald, and Rebecca Van Hove and for critical engagement with the manuscript itself, to Maria Cioata, Marc Brettler, Daniel Pioske and Harald Samuel. I also gratefully acknowledge the Flemish Research Council (FWO), whose generous funding granted me the freedom and security to complete this project. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

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