Introducing biblical hermeneutics: a comprehensive framework for hearing God in scripture

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INTRODUCING BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture

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The Jesuits made biblical study a specialty, and one of their number, Cornelius à Lapide, commented on the whole Bible apart from Job and the Psalms. \(^63\) The complete edition of his work, published again and again in the eighteenth century, comprised eleven huge folio volumes. À Lapide prioritized the literal sense. A French Benedictine, Augustin Calmet, published a *Literal Commentary on All the Books of the Old and the New Testaments* (1710–16). This nonpolemical work includes Jewish and Protestant perspectives. Richard Simon’s (1638–1712) work signaled a birth of “critical” exegesis in the Catholic Church and beyond. \(^64\) Simon questioned the Mosaic origin of parts of the Pentateuch.

Space prohibits any detailed exploration of the works of this period, but note must be made of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. \(^65\) Intriguingly, Erasmus, Calvin, and Ignatius studied at the same college in France and under the same principal, but at different times! Ignatius’s writings and practices are a milestone in the development of lectio divina, an approach that is rightly being revitalized among evangelicals today.

### The Rise of Modern Biblical Interpretation: Humanism Becomes the Light of the World

In the course of our narrative of the history of biblical interpretation thus far, it is clear that exegesis never operated apart from the influence of philosophy and theology. This insight is particularly important as we come to the rise of modern biblical criticism, still the most immediate context in which we practice biblical interpretation today. As Scholder perceptively observes, “One can say with some justification that the beginnings of biblical criticism are initially far more a philosophical than a theological problem . . . in dealing with these questions . . . The church historian finds himself or herself transported into the largely uncharted area which lies between philosophy and theology.” \(^66\)

The roots of modern criticism go far back into the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, beyond that into the Renaissance and so on. However, something new appeared with the rise of modern philosophy, science, and the consequent historical revolution, developments with radical implications for biblical interpretation. Philosophy was closely connected with the emergent...
science; figures such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel transformed the philosophical landscape with implications for every academic discipline.

As we will see, the early modern critical biblical scholars acknowledged the formative influence of the new philosophies on their work, but a crucial change came with Julius Wellhausen, who argued that philosophy followed on from biblical criticism but did not precede it. Karl Barth, a very different figure from Wellhausen, has ironically had a similar effect. Barth is the colossus standing behind the recovery of theological interpretation today, but part of his legacy is a profound suspicion of philosophy, with the result that many proponents of theological interpretation continue to ignore the formative influence of philosophy on the discipline of biblical interpretation.

Despite the ravaging of modernity by so-called postmodernity, the narrative of modernity as one of progress remains deeply rooted in Western culture, and it is still far too easy to accept such a narrative uncritically in biblical studies today. The way we tell the story of the emergence of modern biblical criticism is, however, never neutral. For example, in volume 4 of his History of Biblical Interpretation, when Reventlow comes to deal with Wilhelm de Wette, the father of modern biblical criticism, the chapter is headed "Biblical Studies as a Science." Implicit in such a heading is that it was not a science or truly critical before this era! Our narrative thus far reveals that this is quite incorrect, but so deeply is the modern narrative embedded in our consciousness that we need to become sensitized as to what baggage we are accepting when we periodize biblical studies with terms like precritical and critical, premodern and modern. This is not for a moment to deny the genuine progress made by modern biblical criticism or to propose a return to patristic exegesis, for example, but it is to insist that modern (and postmodern) biblical criticism operates within philosophical paradigm/s that these require close inspection before being adopted as the "objective" way forward. Scholder and Reventlow have stressed the importance of examining the development of the historical-critical method in its historical and cultural context. The main figures of the development are well known, but "up until now it has not been described in context." Exploring this context will involve examining its philosophical-hermeneutical elements closely, as Scholder recognizes in his


68. Mary Hesse ("How to Be Postmodern without Being a Feminist," The Monist 77/4 [1994]: 445-61) notes that Western liberalism remains so much the background of postmodernism that it is barely noticed.

assertion that investigation of this area will result in the theologian finding himself or herself "transported into the largely uncharted area which lies between philosophy and theology."

The Development and Nature of the Historical-Critical Method

Modern biblical criticism has come to be called historical criticism, which is fine as long as we remain alert to the diversity within this "family." "Historical" and "critical" both identify key elements of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. Critical signifies the subjection of the biblical tradition to examination on the basis of the modern worldview. As Scholder points out, this was clearly understood by F. C. Baur, who in a discussion with a colleague at Jena, Karl Hase, asserted that "in the end only that view can prevail which brings unity, connection and rational consistency to our world-view, our understanding of the history of the Gospel, our whole consciousness." Scholder comments: "'Unity, connection and rational consistency': that means, quite simply, honest exegesis—honest to the degree that in principle it must be carried on with a concern for the understanding of reality 'which has been gained by the spirit in modern times.'" Historical indicates that it is particularly the Enlightenment historical method that is applied to the Bible by the historical-critical method, especially as it came to maturity in the nineteenth century.

In this section our approach will be as follows. First, we will briefly outline the development of the historical-critical method, with a detailed focus on de Wette and Wellhausen. Then we will examine Edgar Krentz's explication of the method as an example of a proponent of historical criticism.

The Origins of the Historical-Critical Method

Rogerson describes Germany as the home of the historical-critical method, and indeed, it was in nineteenth-century Germany that the historical-critical

70. Scholder, Birth of Modern Critical Theology, 5–6.
71. Ibid., 2–3. For a discussion of Baur's hermeneutic, see R. A. Harrisville and W. Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 111–30.
72. Scholder, Birth of Modern Critical Theology, 2–3.
method reached maturity. However, before the second half of the eighteenth century, Germany had hardly been touched by critical theology, whereas a century earlier orthodoxy was forced onto the defensive in all other Western European countries. Thus, if the mature adulthood of the historical-critical method is to be found in Germany, this is not true of its early and adolescent years; generally they are found elsewhere.

Exactly how far back one goes to discover the roots of the historical-critical method is debatable. However, the emergence of the modern worldview and the rejection of a synthesis of nature with grace were things new and unprecedented in their scale. Consequently, it seems wise to follow Krentz and Scholder in focusing analysis on the seventeenth and following centuries as we trace the rise of the historical-critical method. Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity and the development of the printing press were crucial ingredients in the recipe for modernity. But, as Toulmin’s distinction between the two origins of the modern world indicates, it was a particular approach to and use of antiquity that produced the modern worldview, not just rediscovery of antiquity.

This particular approach emerged through the emancipation of reason from “all constraints” in philosophy and its penetration of science and history. The scientific and historical revolutions of the Enlightenment gave birth to the historical-critical method. It was Descartes who emancipated reason, and “like a young stallion locked up in stables for winter set free in spring pasture, it galloped far and wide with a wild and virile exuberance. The main shackle to be cast off was that of religion. . . . Out of the scientific explosion the decisive blow against religion was struck by history, which now replaced myth.” The changes that came about in the seventeenth century and became focused on the Bible in the historical-critical method began with philosophy (Descartes), exploded in the ongoing scientific revolution (Newton), and developed in history, from where they were focused hermeneutically on the Bible. Alan Richardson expresses this most clearly:

75. Scholder, Birth of Modern Critical Theology, 4-5.
76. See the important work by S. W. Hahn and B. Wiker, Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700 (New York: Herder and Herder, 2013).
78. Reventlow (Authority of the Bible, 3) locates the starting point of historical-critical theology in late medieval spiritualism.
The thought of our own times has been shaped by the two great intellectual revolutions of the modern period—the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the revolution in historical method which was the great achievement of the nineteenth century. The two revolutions are not indeed separate and distinct things; perhaps we should think rather of one great reorientation of the human mind, which began with the Renaissance and is still continuing. It began with the rise of what we today call the natural sciences; and by the nineteenth century it had embraced the sphere of history and what are now called the human sciences.81

Shifts in historiography are harder to identify than scientific ones, with the result that the changes in historiography are regularly subordinated to the scientific revolution. "That is certainly a mistake; for which insight in the end changed our understanding of reality more deeply is a completely open question."82 As early as the mid-seventeenth century Isaac de la Peyrère in his Praedamitae (Man before Adam, on Rom. 5:12–14) raised the question of how the nations and their religion could be reconciled with the Bible. "There is no more impressive evidence than this remarkable book of what a profound problem the old view of history had already become by the middle of the seventeenth century. With it—almost a century before Voltaire—the development of the new universal-historical conception of world history begins."83

The medieval view of history did not collapse overnight; historical consciousness was slowly restructured between 1550 and 1650. Jean Bodin’s Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem produced the first criticism of Melanchthon’s picture of history.84 Bodin critiqued the scheme of the four monarchies of Daniel, pled for the notion of human progress, made chronology the presupposition of all historical understanding, and maintained that the question of whether time is eternal must be decided not by tradition but by compelling arguments. "The more marked consideration of political realities, the extension of perspective beyond the limits of the West, the demands for compelling arguments even where tradition has long decided—all this points to the beginning of an emancipation from a purely biblical-theological understanding of the world and the history of nations."85

82. Scholder, Birth of Modern Critical Theology, 65.
83. Ibid., 67.
84. No fewer than 12 editions of this text were published up to 1650.
85. Scholder, Birth of Modern Critical Theology, 75.
The result was a shift similar to that in philosophy and science. History gradually became autonomous from theology. The Scriptures were treated more and more as ordinary historical documents. “The process of objectification had begun.”

The eighteenth century was the heyday of the Enlightenment. The critical approach toward the Bible was consolidated in deism, but the triumph of abstract reason restrained the move toward a fully historical approach to the Bible. However, already in the seventeenth century Spinoza had argued for a historical approach to the Bible. Now through the labors of scholars such as Turrentinus, Wetzstein, Ernesti, Astruc, Semler, Eichhorn, Gabler, and Michaelis there was a slow but steady move toward a more historical interpretation of the Bible. A particularly significant figure in the latter half of the seventeenth century was Semler. He was the first German Protestant theologian to approach the Bible through the history of religions and to insist on a critical rather than a dogmatic reading of it. The interpreter must seek to discover what the original author meant by the text. Keil likewise stressed that an interpreter must think the author’s thoughts after him without judging them. The exegete should establish only the facts. “The standard for subsequent commentaries was formulated.”

By the end of the eighteenth century in Germany, most Old Testament professors were either neologists (skeptical biblical scholars) or rationalists. Semler and Michaelis were the founders of neologism. Brought up as Pietists, they abandoned Pietism through the influence of Spinoza and deism. As the eighteenth century moved into the nineteenth, neologism was increasingly replaced by rationalism and supranaturalism, both responses to the Kantianism that penetrated most of the theological faculties in the 1790s. Source criticism of the Pentateuch was advanced through the labors

86. Krentz, Historical-Critical Method, 16.
of Eichhorn in particular, but there was no radical reconstruction of the history of Israel.  

The historical thought of the Enlightenment, as we explained above, was more philosophical than historical. The eighteenth century fostered an understanding of history dominated by the idea of progress. This philosophy of history continued into the nineteenth century, but it was being displaced by German historicism and Hegelian philosophy. Historicism refers to the sort of historical thought that dominated Germany from the rise of Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century, down to the mid-twentieth century. It represents a reaction to the idea of progress and is characterized by a belief that all cultures are molded by history, a privileging of intuition as the means whereby we understand groups other than our own, and a denial of history as linear.

Barthold G. Niebuhr's *Römische Geschichte* (1811–12) was a major early historicist work. According to Krentz, two questions dominated his method: What is the evidence? What is the value of the evidence? In this way Niebuhr sought to separate poetry from truth in his sources and to reconstruct what happened in a more believable narrative. As Collingwood points out, the classic example of this is Niebuhr's treatment of Livy. Niebuhr argues that much of what was taken for early Roman history is patriotic fiction of a later period, and that even the earliest stratum is not sober fact but a national epic of the ancient Roman people. Behind the epic, Niebuhr detects the historical reality of early Rome, a society of peasant farmers. As Bebbington makes clear, Niebuhr's approach was more nuanced than Krentz suggests.

Leopold von Ranke, another historicist, concentrated on collecting the facts of history—commitment to detail being a characteristic of this school—but also sought the unity of history. The historian must penetrate to the inwardness of events. Every moment in history is equidistant from God. This approach assumed some sensible idea or divine presence moving through all history, whether it was Hegel’s spirit, von Ranke’s governing God, Droysen’s ethical progress, or Humboldt’s pantheistic truth. After 1850, historical inquiry became

93. Ibid., 19–27.
98. Collingwood notes that this method goes back via Herder to Vico, and that by the mid-nineteenth century it was the common property of all competent historians, at least in Germany (ibid., 130).
more immanentist, a turn well represented by Eduard Meyer, for whom the historian should describe happenings and not seek laws and general ideas. It was during the early nineteenth century that the turning point for critical study of the Old Testament occurred.

W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849): Founder of Modern Biblical Criticism

Wilhelm de Wette was the first to use a critical methodology to articulate a view of Israel's history quite different from that implied in the Old Testament. Because of his doctorate on Deuteronomy, his seventh-century BC dating of it, and his association of the promulgation of Deuteronomy with the reign of King Josiah, de Wette is most well known as an Old Testament critic. However, de Wette wrote substantially on the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Christian theology. He stands therefore at the origin of biblical criticism as a whole.

De Wette grew up in a Protestant family and studied at the University of Jena, where his illustrious teachers included Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Griesbach. For de Wette, however, the major challenge to his faith came from Kant. In 1798, the year before de Wette came to Jena, Kant published his Der Streit der Fakultäten, in which he outlines an understanding of religion within the bounds of reason alone. As Rogerson says,

However illustrious his Jena teachers were, the greatest initial impact that was made upon de Wette came from the philosophy of Kant. Indeed, for the remainder of his life, de Wette remained, intellectually, a sort of Kantian; and he spent many years of his life trying to reconcile his intellectual acceptance of Kant with his aesthetic and almost mystical instinct for religion.

Just how influential Kant was on de Wette is apparent from de Wette’s semi-autobiographical novel Theodore, in which he describes Kant’s influence on him as follows:

105. Cf. Rogerson, W. M. L. de Wette, 27–30, for a description of the content of a lecture that Kant gave at the University of Jena the year before de Wette arrived there. This lecture gives one an insight into the view of religion that Kant was expounding at this time.
Theodore heard at the same time some lectures on morals from a Kantian philosopher, through which a completely new world was opened up to him. The notions of the self-sufficiency of reason in its law-giving, of the freedom of the will through which he was elevated above nature and fate, ... all these notions gripped him powerfully, and filled him with a high self-awareness. Those shadowy ideas about the love of God and Christ, about the new birth, about the rule of God's grace in the human mind, ... these he translated now into this new philosophical language, and so they appeared to him clearer and more certain.

Kant's view had radical implications for religion and biblical interpretation. There is no agreed interpretation of the Bible, but a religion of reason can yield this, because it gets at universal truths of reason. Religion is reduced to morality, and Christian theology is adjusted accordingly. The contingent truths of history cannot be revelatory since revelation is disclosed through reason. Schelling helped de Wette to develop a critique of Kant's overprivileging of philosophy as final arbiter in all disciplines. For Schelling, God as the Absolute was primary, and reason was a part of the Absolute by which the individual could perceive the Absolute in the particular. Religion is the contemplation of the Absolute as it is manifested in nature, history, and art. Schelling regarded mythology positively because it is an attempt to grasp the Absolute. Schelling's understanding of mythology profoundly influenced de Wette's approach to the Bible, especially to the Old Testament.

In his dissertation (submitted 1804) and in his Aufforderung zum Studium der hebräischen Sprache und Literatur (1805), de Wette developed a portrait of the history of Israelite religion differing radically from that of the Old Testament itself, a portrait that formed the basis for development of critical scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But whence did de Wette get this portrait? From reading the text, from reading it in a way not constricted by theories of unity of authorship, but also, says Rogerson, by reading the Old Testament through the grid of a certain view of religion, regarding it as developing from a simple to a complex phenomenon, a view that de Wette probably got from Schelling's Philosophie der Kunst. The Aufforderung contains a devastating attack on the historicity of the Old Testament, motivated by de Wette's view of religion and mythology. From Kant, de Wette had learned, and learned well, that the contingent truths of history cannot be revelatory. Probably from Karl Philipp Moritz's Die Götterlehre (1791), de Wette learned that myths were never history but poetry, and although myths were fantasy, they could contain sublime ideas.

106. Quoted by Rogerson, Old Testament Criticism, 37.
Thus the pentateuchal stories are generally of no value for the historian but of great value for the theologian because of their witness to religion. The Pentateuch "is a product of the religious poetry of the Israelite people, which reflects their spirit [Geist], way of thought, love of the nation, philosophy of religion." 107 Similarly, in his 1811 commentary on the Psalms, de Wette argues that in many cases it is impossible to determine the historical contexts of many biblical psalms, but this does not matter because what is important is religion expressed in poetic form. 108

One is struck by the profound influence of philosophical and theological issues on de Wette's thought. According to Rogerson:

De Wette was convinced that biblical interpretation and theology were concerned with reality, and that reality could only be understood with the help of philosophy. In this he was surely right. Implicit in Christian belief are claims about the nature of reality, about the sort of world in which we live and about the sort of things human beings are. Although philosophy in a broad sense does not seek to provide answers to these questions, it does offer critiques of attempted answers, it exposes contradictions and tautologies and offers conceptual frameworks for deeper reflection. Those who claim to have no philosophy are simply unaware of their philosophical presuppositions.

In using philosophy so unashamedly in his biblical interpretation, theology and ethics, de Wette was standing in an honourable tradition reaching back through Protestant scholasticism to Aquinas and the church of those centuries that produced the classical creeds of Christian orthodoxy. This was one reason why de Wette rejected such orthodoxy, believing that it was based upon inadequate philosophy. . . . We cannot fault de Wette's sincerity in making his views about the nature of reality affect his biblical interpretation and his theology. 109

Three ways in which de Wette is of major significance for our narrative are as follows:

1. De Wette recognized that human perspectives or worldviews are unified, and he saw the unavoidable connections between one's view of reason and history and religion, thus one's philosophy, and how one reads the Bible. Here de Wette has much to teach us. Modernity has been characterized by an explosion in knowledge and a strong differentiation into disciplinary and subdisciplinary areas. An effect of this is that scholars take longer and

107. Quoted in Rogerson, W. M. L. de Wette, 55.
108. See Theodore Parker's comment that de Wette is a rationalist and mystic at the same time, via ibid., 66.
109. Ibid., 267, 268, with added emphasis.
longer to specialize in less and less. There is little time and often no encour-
agement for scholars to descend into the subtexts of their disciplines and
so connect with the larger issues that impact their scholarship. De Wette's
work is a reminder that, like it or not, our view of the world and our un-
derstanding of reason, religion, language, and so forth will shape the way
we work with the Bible. The great merit of de Wette is his consciousness
of these influences.

2. De Wette recognized the fundamental role of philosophy in academic
analysis. De Wette saw, as it were, that philosophical scaffolding is always
in place when academic construction is being done, even if scholars are not
aware of it: always an epistemology is assumed, always some ontology is taken
for granted, always some view of the human person is in mind. De Wette is
remarkably contemporary with regard to this, for he was alert to the philo-
sophical subtext of his work, yet many contemporary scholars seem blissfully
unaware of philosophy behind their own work. As Thiselton observes, biblical
scholars tend to remain philosophically illiterate and thus to be destined to
work within outworn paradigms. De Wette's work is a salutary reminder
of all the ingredients involved in biblical interpretation.

3. De Wette believed that the true philosophy was that done in the Kan-
tian/Schelling/Friesian tradition, and his life's work is devoted to rethinking
religion and the Bible and theology within that framework. Especially in our
late modern time, this commitment to Kantian philosophy is controversial.
But, whatever one thinks of de Wette's Kantianism, his candor is refreshing,
as is his quest for integration of his philosophy with his scholarship and his
theology.

Scholars continue to work with philosophical paradigms shaping their
work, but generally they ignore these paradigms, with the result that they
are hidden from view and their scholarship has the appearance of neutral,
objective analysis. De Wette's openness about his paradigm enables one to get
a look at the total picture that makes up his work, and this puts the reader in
a position to examine and evaluate his work in its totality.

110. A. C. Thiselton, "Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and
Theological Hermeneutics," in The Promise of Hermeneutics, by R. Lundin, C. Walhout, and
A. C. Thiselton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 133–239. Thiselton states,
Curiously, the limits of scientific method to explain all of reality seem to be appreciated
more readily in the philosophy of religion than in biblical studies. Views and methods
that students in philosophy of religion recognize as "positivist," "reductionist," or even
"materialist" are often embraced quite uncritically in issues of judgement about, e.g.,
acts of God in biblical narrative. In place of the more rigorous and judicious exploration
of these issues in philosophical theology, biblical studies seems too readily to become
polarized. (Ibid., 137)
Rogerson agrees with de Wette that philosophy is unavoidable in theoretical analysis. But then Rogerson makes some extraordinary moves! He asserts that Christian belief implies certain philosophical positions. And then, on this basis, de Wette is commended for adopting a Kantian framework and fitting religion within it! Does Christian belief imply the framework of Kant's secular city, so that we then search for a place for religion within the limits of reason? The assumption that Kant's philosophy is compatible with Christian belief is not an unusual view, as the image of Kant as the "philosopher of Protestantism" reminds us. There is a strong tradition in liberal Protestant theology of Kant's philosophy as a mediator between faith and modern culture. However, as Beiser shows, even in Kant's day his views were very controversial, and the issues of theology and God in relation to Kant's theology were fiercely debated. A figure we need to recover in the story of philosophy is Hamann, a contemporary and fierce critic of Kant, after his conversion to Christianity.

In recent decades Kant's anthropology has come in for strong criticism from liberation and feminist theologians and from postliberals, reminding us at the very least that "the Cartesian-Kantian model of the self is historically contingent, rather than the indispensable conceptual device for properly framing the issue of faith and transcendence." It is true that evaluation of Kant as a "Christian thinker" remains controversial today. Personally, I think Michalson is right to argue that Kant's immanentism and view of human autonomy subvert theism so that Kant, as much as Hegel, should be understood as facilitating the transformations in European culture that we associate with the rise of atheism rather than being foundational for a mediating theology. From this perspective, Kant is a key figure on the Luther-Kant-Feuerbach-Marx trajectory, and one of whom, as Buckley warns in his explorations of the origins of atheism, Christian thinkers should be cautious. The implications for theology and biblical interpretation are clear:

114. Michalson, Kant and the Problem, 128–32.
115. Ibid., 136.
117. Michalson, Kant and the Problem, 127.
118. M. J. Buckley, At the Origins of Modern Atheism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), which rightly states: The atheism evolved in the eighteenth century was thus not to be denied by the strategies elaborated in the revolutions of Kant and Schleiermacher: it was only to be transposed.
The consistent subordination of divine transcendence to the demands of autonomous rationality strongly suggests that Kant's own thought... is moving in a non-theistic direction rather than in a direction with obviously constructive possibilities for theology. ... The religious feature may remain present, but that is not where the real life is, any more than the twitching body of a beheaded reptile indicates real life. As a result, Kant's own example is hardly a comforting model for those committed to holding divine transcendence and a modern sensibility in proper balance. In his case, the balancing act cannot be sustained; his particular way of endorsing modernity is finally too self-aggrandizing. 119

One may—which I do not!—wish to argue that Kant is a helpful mediating figure for biblical interpretation between faith and modern culture, but then the case has to be argued, not assumed. As J. D. Caputo perceptively notes, "So what you think about modernity lies at the root of many of the arguments you hear about philosophy and theology." 120 Rogerson rightly declares that de Wette's lasting "achievement" was to apply historical criticism to the Bible so as to produce a history radically different from that of the Bible itself. Nicholson notices the indebtedness of Reuss, George, Vatke, and crucially Wellhausen to de Wette. 121 What tends to be forgotten is de Wette's indebtedness to Kant in moving Old Testament scholarship in this direction in the first place.

Gesenius, Gramberg, and George developed de Wette's reconstruction of the history of Israel. 122 Vatke published his Biblical Theology in 1835 (in German). In the critical interpretation of the Old Testament, he was mainly guided by de Wette and Gesenius, but his work is deeply influenced by Hegel. Under the influence of contemporary philosophical trends and secular historical research, biblical criticism refined its techniques. Schleiermacher had given historical criticism a positive place in his analysis of understanding, and his prestige gave respectability to the use of historical method in biblical studies, which now came to be increasingly practiced at German universities.

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120. J. D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 11. For a trenchant, accessible critique of Descartes and Kant, see ibid., 21–34.
122. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 50–68. He mentions but does not explore the philosophical influences on all three.
where the Old Testament was studied on a large scale. The Biblia Hebraica soon appeared, and in 1829 Heinrich Meyer produced the first volume of his Critical and Exegetical Commentary. For Meyer, exegesis was to be free of dogmatic and party spirit, not captive to any "ism," and the exegete should simply determine what the author said. By the end of the century, the International Critical Commentary and the Handkommentar were also in production. By this time even the conservative scholars used the historical method to determine the facts. They differed only in their attempt to keep revelation close to the facts.

In terms of historical criticism and New Testament studies, the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) had far-reaching consequences. Baur was raised in a pastor's home, trained at the seminary of the University of Tübingen, and served as a pastor in 1814–26. At seminary he espoused the rationalism of the day, but the turning point for him came when he read Schleiermacher's The Christian Faith. Shortly after reading this, in a letter to his brother of July 26, 1823, Baur stated that, "according to Schleiermacher, the primary source of Christianity lies in the religious self-consciousness, out of whose development the principal doctrines of Christianity are to be obtained." Baur embraced this view and argued that the universal, religious sense of dependence manifested itself in a variety of religions and myths, all resulting from a process of divine education within history. Far more than Schleiermacher, Baur proved willing to apply his antisupernatural approach consistently to the New Testament.

Using Hegel's evolutionary paradigm, Baur articulated a comprehensive explanation of the development of early Christianity via a split between a gentile Christianity represented by Paul and a Jewish Christianity represented by Peter. This bitter conflict and its ultimate resolution within the emerging Catholic church dominate the New Testament and drove the development of the early church until the end of the second century. In his Paulus (1845), Baur argued that the Pauline Letters could not be reconciled with the accounts in Acts; the latter book cannot be accepted as historically trustworthy and dates from the mid-second century. Based on his historical work, Baur concluded that only Romans, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians were genuinely Pauline.

As Scott Hafemann explains:

123. Ibid., 138.
With the rise of Baur, a purely historical and critical investigation of the Bible established itself as orthodoxy within the world of scholarship. Ever since Baur all interpretations of the New Testament have had to pass the test of historical probability in a way not enforced prior to the nineteenth century, even for those who accept the reality of divine intervention and the authority of Scripture.¹²⁷

H. Harris argues that no single event changed biblical scholarship as much as the appearance of the Tübingen school.¹²⁸

Probably the most significant Old Testament figure of the nineteenth century was Wellhausen. His documentary hypothesis (for the origins of the Pentateuch) became the virtual consensus, as did his understanding of the history of Israel. Wellhausen's decontextualization of Old Testament research is a good example of Toulmin’s characterization of modernity; decontextualization became ever stronger in Old Testament studies. Indeed, up to the present, it is rare to find biblical scholars who find it necessary to grapple with these broader issues in their research. Sadly, we would be most surprised to find a contemporary Old Testament scholar, like Vatke, starting a book with a chapter on the nature of religion!

**Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918): A Watershed**

The most thorough recent study of Wellhausen and German philosophy is Perlitt’s (1965) *Vatke und Wellhausen*. Perlitt recounts the similarities of Wellhausen to Vatke but also their differences. For example, Wellhausen, unlike Vatke, does not see postexilic Judaism as a positive development,¹²⁹ whereas a Hegelian view of history would push one in this direction. And in his finding of a secure starting point for the history of Israel in the formation of Israel as a people, Wellhausen follows the organic-development method of the historical school and Hegel and Vatke.¹³⁰ Likewise with his view of progress, Perlitt points out that Wellhausen does not need Hegel or evolutionism: “The concept of development stretching from Lessing via Herder, Goethe, Schleiermacher, and idealistic philosophy to de Wette, Ranke, and Wellhausen has, of course, a specific, common foundation and colouring in its application to history.”¹³¹ Perlitt later argues that Wellhausen’s view of Israel’s development is akin to

¹²⁸ H. Harris, *Tübingen School*, 1.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 172.
¹³¹ Ibid., 178–79.
"historicism's individualising concept of development," of which Herder is a prime example.\textsuperscript{132} The relationship of Wellhausen to the philosophies of his day is complex, and such areas of overlap with Vatke and Hegel do not demonstrate strong dependence.

Perlitt states, furthermore, that Wellhausen, like the Dutch critic Kuenen, firmly rejected the imposition of alien philosophies on the Bible: Wellhausen and Kuenen "agree completely at least in the rejection of pre- and alien philosophical determination."\textsuperscript{133} In contrast to Vatke, Wellhausen began his work with philological and text-critical analysis of the biblical text. "Thus Wellhausen proceeded in a methodologically secure way from literary analysis to historical criticism."\textsuperscript{134}

Wellhausen was aware that history writing is never a neutral, totally objective enterprise. However, despite this awareness, Wellhausen's response to Strauss's \textit{Leben Jesu} manifests where his real sympathies lie with respect to philosophical influence on biblical study. Wellhausen wrote:

> Because Strauss showed and acknowledged himself to be a child of Hegel in his concept of myth, his book was judged simply as an extension of so-called Hegelianism. Biblical criticism, however, did not in general develop under the influence of philosophical ideas. . . . Philosophy does not precede, but follows \[biblical criticism\], in that it seeks to evaluate and to systematise that which it has not itself produced. The authors—who were friends—of the two great theological works of 1835 [Strauss's \textit{Life of Jesus} and Vatke's \textit{Biblical Theology}, both in German] were certainly Hegelian. But that which is of scholarly significance in them does not come from Hegel. As Vatke is the disciple of, and the one who brings to completion the work of, de Wette, so Strauss completes the work of the old rationalists. The true value of the \textit{Life of Jesus} lies not in the philosophical introduction and concluding section, but in the main part which in terms of its extent exceeds the others by far.\textsuperscript{135}

Perlitt and Rogerson notice how this statement exemplifies Wellhausen's view of philosophy and biblical study. "Where Wellhausen positions his own work in this clear distinction between biblical criticism (as science) and philosophy (as an interpretation which follows criticism and merely systematizes


\textsuperscript{133} Perlitt, \textit{Vatke und Wellhausen}, 160.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 168.

\textsuperscript{135} Quoted in ibid., 204.
it), can after all not be doubted."\textsuperscript{136} "One must rather proceed from particular impulses which arise from the exegesis."\textsuperscript{137}

With this statement we see the extent to which Wellhausen differed from Vatke and many of his predecessors. Their extensive treatments of the nature of religion indicate a strong awareness of the influence of philosophical questions on their work. Wellhausen has a different view of the relationship between Old Testament exegesis and philosophy. It is a view in which exegesis is relatively uncontaminated by philosophy; Old Testament research uncovers the facts, and philosophy can follow the facts but should not precede them!

Rogerson is alert to philosophical influence on biblical studies, and he acknowledges that biblical criticism has been more influenced by philosophy than Wellhausen allows. However, he quotes from Wellhausen's discussion of Strauss's \textit{Leben Jesu}, and then in agreement with Wellhausen, Rogerson argues:

\begin{quote}
If biblical criticism is defined as the investigation of the literary processes which brought the books of the Bible to their extant form, together with a critical evaluation of the history and culture of ancient Israel and Judea so as to interpret biblical material in its original historical and cultural setting, it is difficult to see how philosophy, even defined very broadly, can affect such investigations. Surely, the reconstruction of the history of Israel, or of the apostolic period, involves the use of an historical method unaffected by philosophy. Further, the conclusion, based upon the alteration of the divine names and other criteria in the "Flood" narrative of Genesis 6–9, that this narrative is a combination of two originally separate written accounts, is something else that in no way depends upon philosophy. . . . I am happy to agree that in many of its technical procedures, biblical criticism is not affected by philosophy.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

Wellhausen—plus Rogerson and so many others!—have thereby adopted a radically different understanding than de Wette and Vatke of how philosophy relates to biblical criticism. For de Wette, biblical interpretation is shaped by one's view of religion and one's philosophy. For Wellhausen and for Rogerson, philosophy follows on from biblical interpretation and scholarship. The effect is dramatic! In one fell swoop, as it were, what Toulmin calls the standard account of modernity is entrenched in biblical criticism, thereby obscuring the tradition/s in which this style of biblical interpretation is embedded. The

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 205.
observation of the text by Wellhausen and his followers now becomes objective and scientific, (relatively) unadulterated by philosophical perspectives.

The effect of this approach to biblical study is in a positivist direction, in the sense that historical criticism is now understood to uncover the facts of Israel’s history, and to be scientific, objective, and neutral in this regard. And since Wellhausen, this view has come to dominate Old Testament studies. James Barr has been very influential on Old Testament studies and in a recent publication, despite the emergence of postmodernism, he can still assert:

*The typical biblical scholarship of modern times has been rather little touched by philosophy*—certainly much less than it has been touched by theology. Going back to the last century, one remembers Vatke and his Hegelianism, and it has long been customary to accuse Wellhausen of the same thing though the accusation has long been proved to be an empty one. And after that we do have an influence of philosophy, but mostly on the theological use of the Bible rather than on biblical scholarship in the narrower sense.139

This approach won the day in modern liberal and, to a significant extent, evangelical biblical studies. A common epistemological starting point was assumed, the difference generally being the conclusions reached. Thus there is some truth in James Barr’s critique of evangelicalism in his *Fundamentalism* that one generally knows which conclusions evangelicals are going to reach. Nowadays this common epistemological starting point often manifests itself in the noble guise of “going where the truth takes you” as if the questions you ask and your epistemology and unavoidable religious starting point have no influence on the “truth” arrived at. Rogerson does grapple with the broader philosophical issues, and he acknowledges that biblical criticism has been far more influenced by philosophy than Wellhausen allows, but he too removes the heart of historical criticism from philosophical influence.

The problem of the relationship between faith and historical knowledge became acute toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the history of religions school, which sought to explain the Bible in terms of its surrounding cultures. Gunkel was the key Old Testament figure in the history of religions school. “Its basic outlook was positivistic. The Bible, firmly anchored in its own world, was interpreted as an amalgam of various borrowed motifs, and became a book strange to modern men.”140

With Germany at the forefront, by the end of the nineteenth century historical criticism dominated Protestantism on the continent. England and America embraced the historical-critical method much later than Germany, but by the end of the nineteenth century its success there was also ensured. As Krentz points out,

"It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism the approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. . . . The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history had become the criterion for understanding the Bible. . . . The Bible stood before criticism as defendant before judge. The criticism was largely positivist in orientation, immanentist in its explanations, and incapable of appreciating the category of revelation."  

From one angle the whole of twentieth-century theology can be seen as an attempt to relate modernity and faith. World War I called historicism and evolutionary thought into question, inter alia generating a strong reaction to the straitjacket of positivism in biblical interpretation. Karl Barth called for theological interpretation while also finding a place for historical criticism. Krentz captures the tension of biblical interpretation in Barth and the twentieth century: "By the end of the Second World War historical criticism was firmly established, not to be dislodged by any attack. But the dangers of historicism to faith were also clear. The central problem of the relation of faith and historical method was posed as strongly as ever." Throughout the twentieth century there have been strong reactions to the historical-critical method in Old Testament studies. These reactions will be our concern below.

**Krentz's Articulation of the Historical-Critical Method**

It is apparent from the above that historical method in modernity is diverse. Different historical methods handled the Old Testament differently, so it seems impossible to pin down the historical-critical method in biblical interpretation. Krentz recognizes this ambiguity: "Today historical criticism is taken for granted. . . . Yet it is anything but clear just what we mean when

141. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 30, with added emphasis.
we use the phrase *historical method*. The effect of modernity, however, has been to decontextualize the method and to promote the assumption that there is one historical-critical method. Thus even Krentz, who recognizes this problem, does not face it but quotes Wilckens with approval and then follows his advice: “The only scientifically responsible interpretation of the Bible is that investigation of the biblical texts that, with a methodologically consistent use of historical understanding in the present state of its art, seeks via reconstruction to recognize and describe the meaning these texts have had in the context of the tradition and history of early Christianity.”

For Krentz, history is systematic (analytical) knowledge of the past. The historical-critical method in biblical interpretation “produces history in the modern sense, for it consciously and critically investigates biblical documents to write a narrative of the history they reveal.” The modern historian, like the historical-critical biblical scholar, seeks to explain what happened and why. History involves interpretation, and the biblical scholar must explain how the diversity of thought arose in Israel. His first task is to hear the text on its own terms: “This basic respect for the historical integrity of a text is inherent in all criticism.” The text has hermeneutical autonomy, and the exegete must go where the text leads. Thus “the critical biblical scholar will not only question the texts, but [also question] himself—his methods, his conclusions, and his presuppositions—and the others who share in the same task.” His work is his own judgment, and yet he submits to the text: “where that text deals with the profundities of man, that calls for a submission to the autonomy of the text that calls the historian forth for judgment and knowledge of himself. Then history performs its humane (or in the case of the biblical texts) its theological function.”

144. Ibid., 33.
145. This tendency is recognized in a fascinating article by J. McIntyre, “Historical Criticism in a ‘History-Centered Value System,’” in *Language, Theology, and the Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr*, ed. S. E. Balentine and J. Barton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 370-84. His opening sentence is as follows: “One circumstance which, more than any others, has controlled the discussion of the relation of faith to history, has been the assumption, held by both the theologians and the historical critics with whom they have been debating, that historical criticism is a single, and fairly simply identifiable, entity.”
148. Ibid., 35.
149. Ibid., 39.
150. Ibid., 53-54.
151. Ibid., 54.
Krentz argues that historical criticism is conservative in its privileging of the text and refusal to privilege traditional interpretations. The historian listens to the text and interrogates it in order to assess it as a testimony to history. All the linguistic tools available are used to determine the meaning of the text for its original hearers. "Concern for literary figures . . . [is] used by the historian to judge the historical usefulness of material, not to achieve a literary appreciation of it per se." Historical method evaluates its sources to determine what really happened and what the significance of those events is. It does not exclude specifically Christian goals for the critical interpretation of the Bible because the historian also seeks to understand himself through a study of the past. However, "the differences between biblical scholarship and secular history derive from the major source, the Bible, and not the methods used. Biblical scholars use the methods of secular history on the Bible to discover truth and explain what happened. The methods are secular. The procedures may be modified to fit the Bible, but are not essentially changed." Krentz lists the following as the main methods of historical-critical interpretation of the Bible: textual criticism, philological study, literary criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, historical criticism, and perhaps Sachkritik (critical assessment of the text).

With regard to presuppositions, Krentz acknowledges that "historical method is anything but a carefully defined and agreed on set of axioms and presuppositions." Troeltsch's 1898 essay articulated the principles of historical criticism and continues to haunt theology. According to Troeltsch, there are three principles of historical method: first, the principle of methodological doubt; second, the principle of analogy; third, the principle of correlation. Troeltsch recognized that the third principle rules out miracle and salvation history, but it is inescapable. By the principle of analogy and correlation, Christianity loses its uniqueness. All current historiography affirms Troeltsch's first principle. The second one is generally affirmed, although a "problem arises when this uniformity is raised to a universal principle that makes some evidence inadmissible." The third principle is very complex. Historicism allowed only causation that is not transcendental or theological; although historicist and positivist philosophies of history are presently in
Despite contemporary disagreements about the nature of historiography, theology cannot, according to Krentz, return to a precritical age: “Christian theologians . . . can in the present only seek to use historical criticism in the service of the Gospel.” Historical criticism does not pose a threat to Scripture because it is congruent with its object, the Bible. The Bible is an ancient text, and historical criticism positions the Bible in our history and “makes the ‘full brightness and impact of Christian ideas’ shine out.” To refuse to use historical criticism would be docetic and a denial of faith in Jesus as the Lord of history.

How does faith relate to this method of biblical interpretation? For Krentz, it is a mistake to think that there is a sacred method of interpretation: “A method does not have faith or unbelief; there are only believing or unbelieving interpreters. As little as there are sacred engineering and architecture used in the construction of a church building, so little is there a sacred method of interpreting a text.” However, there are real tensions between secular historical method and faith. Within the Christian community, the ideal is biblical interpretation in the service of the gospel. Within historical study, the aim is verifiable fact in a significant narrative. A number of proposals for dealing with this tension have been made. For Krentz the tension can be resolved only in the person of the interpreter living in the community of faith, who combines dedication to historical truth with the recognition of his own humanity and need for forgiveness. Historical research, like all of man’s efforts, is also perverted by sin. But in the community of scholarship that lives in the fellowship of the people of God, the errors that arise from human frailty can be corrected and sin forgiven by God’s grace. Then biblical criticism will grow together with faith into the full measure of the stature of Christ, his Gospel, his Word, and his Holy Scripture.

In the course of the twentieth century, a variety of additional reading strategies were added to the typical historical-critical ones, including such approaches as anthropological, sociological, psychological, liberationist,
rhetorical, and so forth. This diversity would explode once postmodernism connected with biblical interpretation, as we will see below.

**Conservative Responses**

Note should be taken of conservative responses to historical criticism as it emerged. Not surprisingly, this was often reactive or embodied in a withdrawal into an unintellectual piety, but this was not always the case. In Germany a prominent critic of historical criticism was the Lutheran churchman Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–69). Although somewhat isolationist in his ecclesiology, his exegetical works were widely influential; several translated into English include his *Dissertations on the Genuineness of the Pentateuch*. No less a contemporary scholar than Gordon Wenham has found resources in Hengstenberg’s work for rethinking the critical approach to Deuteronomy.165

In North America a formidable conservative approach to the Bible emerged in the Princeton and then Westminster schools, with such luminaries as Dick Wilson, Ned Stonehouse, and E. J. Young. In Toronto a more thorough *Introduction to the Old Testament* than that of Young was produced by R. K. Harrison, a sign of evangelical scholarship beginning to catch up with mainstream scholarship.

Nineteenth-century evangelicalism in the English-speaking world was largely unprepared for the scientific and biblical challenges of its day. After the 1870s evangelicalism tended to retreat into a reactive pietism, and it was only in the middle of the twentieth century that this really changed. In terms of biblical studies, the establishment of Tyndale House in Cambridge was significant, and it has gone on to make a major contribution to biblical studies, albeit predominantly in a historical mode.

In terms of the triumph of historical criticism for most of the twentieth century, an important difference between Old Testament and New Testament studies is noteworthy. Stephen Neill and Tom Wright have written a magisterial history of New Testament studies over the past 150 years, and I will not repeat their narrative here.166 It is noteworthy that under the influence of historical criticism, New Testament studies were far less radicalized than Old Testament studies, with moderate, rigorous New Testament study continuing throughout the modern period.

The reason for this, I suggest, is that there was no comparable figure to Wellhausen in New Testament studies (although Baur may be a contender), and even while his work was triumphing in Old Testament studies, moderate, high-caliber, critical but believing work was being done on the New Testament in Cambridge by Westcott (1825–1901), Hort (1828–92) and Lightfoot (1828–89). C. L. Church reviews the scene:

At that critical point when British scholarship was in transition between a complacent, precritical stance to a guarded acceptance of critical methodology, if not conclusions, Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort took the Tübingen challenge seriously. By careful use of historical-critical methods in their commentaries and other works, they showed that more conservative answers could be given to the questions Baur had raised. Lightfoot’s unique contribution was his work in patristics; Westcott’s, his *History of the Canon of the New Testament*; Hort’s, his *Judaistic Christianity*. All three in this Cambridge trio were devout churchmen: they saw themselves as sharing the faith of the apostolic church. As Westcott’s “first and greatest” qualification for the interpretation of the Bible, C. K. Barrett ranks his “conviction that in handling the Bible he was handling the Word of God, and his readiness, or rather his determination, to hear, faithfully and obediently, whatever should be spoken through the written word.” In New Testament studies the line can be traced from this Cambridge trio to twentieth-century New Testament scholars such as the Australian Leon Morris, Ralph Martin, Donald Guthrie, F. F. Bruce, C. K. Barrett, and to myriad contemporary scholars including such luminaries as Don Carson, James Dunn, Richard Bauckham, Ben Witherington, and N. T. Wright.

Certainly in British scholarship there was no comparable trio in Old Testament studies, and it was much later—through the work of Derek Kidner and especially scholars such as Gordon Wenham, John Goldingay, Walter Moberly, and their students—that a comparable believing presence was established in Old Testament scholarship. John Goldingay’s doctorate was in the area of Old Testament theology, and a related but earlier and mainly American movement, now largely forgotten, was that of the Biblical Theology Movement (BTM, 1945–61). See chapter 4 (above) for our discussion of the BTM and its retrieval as a source for today.

Karl Barth (1886–1968)

Within evangelical circles two tendencies have militated against taking Karl Barth seriously as an exegete. First, there has been a tendency to see Barth as heterodox and thus an enemy of orthodoxy. Cornelius Van Til’s philosophical and theological critique of Barth exemplifies this trend. Second, biblical scholars tend to see Barth as a theologian and not as an important exegete.

However, exegesis is utterly central to the Church Dogmatics (CD). What Barth says of Calvin’s Institutes is true of the CD: it is a web of exegesis! The Registerband of CD identifies some fifteen thousand biblical references and two thousand-plus pieces of detailed exegetical discussion of biblical texts. Thus, when he is dealing with the doctrine of creation, Barth has more than one hundred pages discussing Genesis 1 and 2, a treatment that includes detailed exegetical considerations on par with the most rigorous commentary. Two examples from his exegesis might be mentioned to underline this point. Hasel, Wenham, Stek, and others have rightly pointed out that the creation stories in Genesis are inter alia a polemic against worldviews present in the ancient Near East. This poignant insight, which is crucial for a theological understanding of Genesis, is already well developed in Barth’s work on Genesis 1 and 2. Second, recent years have witnessed considerable debate about animal rights and Scripture. In the context of the creation of the beasts on the same day as humankind in Genesis 1, Barth has a wonderful discussion of animals and their connection with humankind, in which he ranges throughout Scripture, drawing in verses like Jonah 4:11.

The truth is that CD and Barth’s other works are an exegetical resource that has been sadly neglected by biblical scholars. But what of the claim that Barth is an enemy of theological orthodoxy? Might this not support keeping him at arm’s length? There is certainly room for theological critique of Barth, but what must be understood is Barth’s theologically conservative reaction to the liberalism of his day, and his recovery of the Bible as Scripture, involving at its core a reappropriation of the Reformed tradition and of Calvin in particular.

Barth’s recovery of the Reformed tradition was so damaging to liberalism because he had been one of them. However, as a young pastor he found that liberalism was bankrupt in the aftermath of World War I when it came to addressing his congregation in the European context. Berkouwer says of Barth and Thurneysen,

But ultimately and most importantly, it was the Bible which saved them from utter despair. "We read the Bible anew, with far fewer presuppositions than before." They heard again the message concerning the forgiveness of sins and the proclamation of the kingdom which is not of men but which comes from God Himself. "From this meeting and confrontation with the Bible in the midst of the need of the time Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* was born." They found again actual answers to the problems with which the times confronted them. They did not find an answer that remained distant from the reality in which they found themselves, but they discovered a message of God that was close as life to them.  

It was Calvin in particular on whom Barth drew as he sought to recover the Bible as the Word of God and as he sought to develop a truly biblical theology. In his lectures on Calvin, Barth recognizes the unique contribution of Calvin as an expositor of Scripture to the Reformation: "Scripture did not play quite the same part in Reformed Protestantism as in Lutheranism. Its dignity here was one of principle as it never was in Lutheranism, no matter how highly the latter regarded it." The big issue for Reformed Protestantism was "how to give God, the true God, the glory, how to do it here and now," and against the backdrop of medieval Catholicism, its answer was to look to the Bible as the final norm in faith and life.

God is known through Scripture; hence the vital importance of exposition. "The relation to the Bible is a living one. The spring does not flow of itself. It has to be tapped. Its waters have to be drawn. The answer is not already there; we have to ask what it is." Here as elsewhere, Barth acknowledges the need to take the written character of Scripture seriously: "We must study it, for it is here or nowhere that we shall find its divinity." This makes historical study of Scripture imperative although such study must never be only historical. Exegesis must finally aim at opening up the mind of Scripture: "The Word ought to be exposed in the words." The work of the Spirit is fundamental to this process because "God is not just the theme but also the

175. See K. Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, 393, on Calvin’s importance for Barth’s study of Romans and for the preface to the 1921 edition of Karl Barth’s *Romans*.
176. Published as K. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*.
177. Ibid., 386.
178. Ibid., 387.
179. Ibid., 388.
Lord of biblical truth. Such a process demands hard, objective study of Scripture. Barth rightly invokes the metaphor of listening for this activity: “Listening, even if on the premise of secret identity with the one who speaks, is the task of the exegete.”

Barth identifies three characteristics of Calvin’s exegesis that he finds exemplary. First, there is the extraordinary objectivity of his exegesis. At times Calvin does engage in eisegesis—“if we read nothing into the Bible, we will also read nothing out of it”—but his exegesis is always characterized by a concern to stay close to the text and to do justice to what is actually there. The example Barth gives of Calvin’s eisegesis is that Calvin assumes the unity of the message of the Bible when he reads it: though Scripture is polyphonic, the diverse voices are all seeking to say the same thing.

Second, there is the uniformity of Calvin’s exegesis. By this, Barth refers to Calvin’s concern to attend to individual books in their literary totality and to the whole of Scripture: “If in principle it is seen to be right to listen to the Bible, then we should listen to the whole Bible.” In his commentary work, for example, he is always concerned to expound the whole of a book and not just the parts that have been influential. Calvin’s premise of the verbal inspiration of the Bible did not prevent him from critically examining the trustworthiness of the Bible, but it did give “him a consistent zeal to track down the content of the whole Bible, a zeal incidentally that would also stand historical investigation of the Bible in good stead.”

The third characteristic of Calvin’s exegesis is its relevance. By relevance, Barth is not thinking of application to the cultural and historical context, but the sense that this is God’s Word addressing us. Calvin is at pains to attend to the particularity of texts, but at the same time he is busy with a living dialogue across the centuries. Barth gives the example that when Calvin expounds Paul, “We believe Calvin the more readily because he is not deliberately trying to make us believe but simply setting out what he finds in Paul, yet not, of course, without being able or even trying to hide the fact that he himself believes it. This quiet kinship between the apostle and the exegete speaks for itself.”

183. Ibid.
184. Ibid., 390.
185. Ibid., 393: “It is in its relation to the practical goal of systematics, though without prejudice to its own significance, that the importance of Calvin’s exegesis finally lies.”
186. Ibid., 391.
187. Ibid., noting that verbal inspiration is in the background here.
188. Ibid.
189. Ibid., 392.
In the preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary, Barth defends himself against the accusation that he is an enemy of historical criticism. He denies this but insists that historical criticism must be in the service of genuine understanding and interpretation:

By genuine understanding and interpretation, I mean that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis; which underlies the systematic interpretation of Calvin. . . . For example, place the work of Jülicher side by side with that of Calvin: how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. . . . If a man persuades himself that Calvin’s method can be dismissed with the old-fashioned motto “The Compulsion of Inspiration,” he betrays himself as one who has never worked upon the interpretation of Scripture. 190

There are some differences between Calvin and Barth. Calvin wrote far more commentaries than did Barth and less theology. But just as Calvin’s commentaries are concerned with the theology of the text, so Barth’s dogmatics takes the above characteristics of Calvin’s exegesis with the utmost seriousness. It should thus be clear why Calvin and Barth represent the sort of historical bloodline that urgently needs transfusing into the present. If the Bible is to be recovered for the church as God’s Word, then Calvin and Barth, in my opinion, represent the type of biblical interpretation that we need to appropriate for our day. This will not mean simple repetition of Calvin and/or Barth; whether we agree with Barth’s reading of Calvin or not, Barth’s work alerts us to the way in which a tradition has to be developed and appropriated afresh in a new historical context. Nevertheless, Calvin and Barth’s exegesis pulsates with concerns that biblical interpretation must recover if it is to assist the church in hearing God’s address. Emphases such as these are greatly needed:

• A deep commitment to the Bible as God’s Word.

Both Calvin and Barth recognize that if we wish to glorify God here and now, we must listen to Scripture for his address. As Barth declares, “We are tied to these texts. And we can only ask about revelation when we surrender to the expectation and recollection attested in these texts.” 191

190. K. Barth, Romans, 7.
191. K. Barth, CD I/2:492.
reigns in the church when it is thought that this acknowledgement [of the priority of the Bible] should not be made."192 Even in circles where the authority of Scripture is taken with the utmost seriousness, academic interpretation of the Bible has often failed to have as its goal to hear God’s address.193 Barth is at pains to defend historical criticism, but always insists that it must serve the large goal of listening to Scripture to hear God speak. The problem for Barth is that so much historical criticism stops far short of this goal. Sadly, this has also been true of much orthodox biblical scholarship.

- A refusal to separate biblical study from Christian faith and theology.

Calvin and Barth know nothing of the chasm that has appeared between biblical interpretation and theology in the contemporary academy. Both Calvin and Barth recognize that it is only in faith that one sees Scripture for what it truly is: the Word of God. It is as part of the church that one reads the Bible as Scripture, and as Barth says, “The door of the Bible texts can be opened only from within.”194 One of the great characteristics of Barth’s CD is that even as his conceptual framework takes hold, he does more and not less exegesis. It is as though the doctrinal framework stimulates rather than—as in too many contemporary theologies—suppresses exegesis.

- A commitment to rigorous scholarship, both historical and theological, in the service of exegesis, but always in the service of listening to the whole of the Bible—tota Scriptura—as the word of God.

As Childs insists, we need a hermeneutic in which “the final task of exegesis is to seek to hear the Word of God, which means that the witness of Moses and Jeremiah, of Paul and John, must become a vehicle for another Word. The exegete must come to wrestle with the kerygmatic substance which brought into being the witness.”195 Barth asserts the principle of tota Scriptura as follows: “An exposition is trustworthy to the extent that it not only expounds the text in front of it, but implicitly at least expounds all other texts, to the extent that it at any rate clears the way for the exposition of all other texts.”196

192. Ibid., 502.
193. See E. H. Peterson, Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), chap. 4, for an important discussion of how the contemporary church has lost a capacity to listen.
194. K. Barth, CD I/2:533.
196. K. Barth, CD I/2:485.
A good example of the way in which a reading of a text makes the rest of Scripture resonate, as it were, is Barth’s rich reading of Genesis 1:24–25.197 Barth explores the creation of the animals on the same day as humankind and the consequent links between them. Writing long before the current emphasis on animal rights, Barth explores this text:

Man’s salvation and perdition, his joy and sorrow, will be reflected in the weal and woe of this animal environment and company. Not as an independent partner of the covenant, but as an attendant, the animal will participate with man (the independent partner) in the covenant, sharing both the promise and the curse which shadows the promise. Full of forebodings, but also full of confidence, it will wait with man for its fulfillment, breathing freely again when this has taken place provisionally and will take place definitively.198

In the small-print exegetical discussion that follows this section, what is remarkable is the way Barth ranges across Scripture, thereby demonstrating just how fertile an exegetical principle *analogia Scriptura* can be. Barth notices that this linking of animal and humankind is a familiar thought in both Testaments, as exemplified in Psalm 36:6, in which the LORD is praised because he preserves both man and beast. He leads a fascinating tour of passages ranging among Isaiah 43:20–21; Hosea 2:18; Ezekiel 34; Jonah 3:8; 4:11; Mark 1:13; and so on.

Barth’s caution about philosophy in theology is well known.199 Indeed, in the contemporary renewal of theological interpretation, a legacy from Barth is that many of its best proponents are deeply cautious of “the hermeneutic detour.” There are scholars such as Anthony Thiselton whose two major volumes on hermeneutics bear ample witness to his belief that philosophical hermeneutics has a great deal to offer biblical (and theological) interpretation. But scholars such as Francis Watson and John Webster, and many of the Yale school, are far more reticent about the help that general hermeneutics can provide. Watson and Webster plead for a regional theological hermeneutic for biblical interpretation, a hermeneutic that stems from Christian doctrine and is for theological interpretation. What Barth does not explore is what Alvin Plantinga calls “positive Christian philosophy,” which might be particularly

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197. See K. Barth, CD III/1:176–81. I cannot repeat all the details of Barth’s exegesis, and the reader is strongly encouraged to read these pages directly from Barth.

198. K. Barth, CD III/1:178.

199. For a nuanced account of K. Barth’s view of philosophy and theology, see K. Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Oakes concludes: “Barth never settled on an exact and well-defined account of theology and philosophy... Barth wrote in a welter of ways about this relationship” (ibid., 245).
helpful in bringing philosophy captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4–5) so that it might 
more readily help exegesis in comparison to more alien philosophies. Barth 
is open to ways in which a theological hermeneutic might provide insights 
for general hermeneutics; he fails, however, to take sufficiently seriously the 
insights that hermeneutics might provide for exegesis.

Graham Ward and others have suggested that there may be strong links 
between Barth and postmoderns such as Derrida. This suggestion founders 
when one looks closely at Barth’s understanding of exegesis and his actual 
exegesis. Barth is quite clear, for example, that

in demanding a historical appreciation of the Bible, it must also require—and self-
evidently of every reader of the Bible—that his understanding of it should be based 
on what is said in the Bible and therefore on God’s revelation. It cannot, therefore, 
be conceded that side by side with this there is another legitimate understanding 
of the Bible, that, e.g., in its own way it is right and possible when we hear and 
expound the Bible not to go beyond the humanity as such which is expressed in 
it. . . . It does not speak of itself, but of God’s revelation, and no honest and un-
prejudiced reader of the Bible can ignore this historical definiteness of the word.

Here, as elsewhere, Barth adopts an approach to interpretation much like 
that of Childs’s canonical hermeneutic, in which he argues for determinate 
interpretation that interprets for God’s revelation; like Childs, Barth is not 
prepared to see this as one among a smorgasbord of hermeneutic possibilities. 
Barth and Calvin’s emphasis on the literal sense of Scripture is contrary to 
the postmodern tendency to play with texts and to tease out as many mean-
ings as possible. Barth, very much in the spirit of Calvin, is adamant that “in 
exegesis, too—and especially in exegesis—there is only one truth.” Barth 
says of Calvin that he “hated what he called on one occasion the pleasurable 
playing about with every possible interpretation of the text that we can hardly 
avoid when it comes to Revelation, and wherever he could he avoided leaving 
us with two or more meanings. . . . Each passage has its own truth. Each is 
self-grounded. Each must be expounded in its own context.” Such an orien-
tation to exegesis is poles apart from that of Derrida and other postmoderns.

200. For an example, see K. Barth, CD 1/2:465–66, 471.
201. Graham Ward, Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge 
University Press, 1995).
202. K. Barth, CD 1/2:468.
203. See K. Greene-McCreight, Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the 
"Plain Sense" (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).
204. K. Barth, CD 1/2:470.
205. K. Barth, Theology of John Calvin, 390.
The ongoing influence of Barth should not be underestimated. I still recall hearing Brevard Childs in Cambridge, at a Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar, telling us the story of his journey as a biblical scholar. Inter alia, he described the formative influence of sitting under Barth. Barth's influence on Childs was, in my view, the motivating factor for his lifelong project of recovering the Bible as canon. Similarly the work of Frei, Lindbeck, Seitz, and many others is at least indirectly indebted to Karl Barth.

**The Literary Turn**

A helpful way to grasp the shape of biblical studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is to think in terms of a series of turns, bearing in mind that a new turn does not eradicate the previous one. The twentieth century was dominated by the historical turn initiated by de Wette and Wellhausen. In the 1970s this was challenged by the literary turn.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, positivism was the dominant philosophy in Europe. In literary studies this manifested itself in a concern with questions of genesis, context, and authorial intent. What such an approach neglected was the literary text itself, and this neglect is paralleled in historical criticism's concern with questions of origin and what lies behind the text, and consequent neglect of the (unavoidable) literary shape of the text itself. Alter and Kermode perceptively assess such historical criticism:

This "scientific" criticism was of great cultural and doctrinal importance; but, as we have said, it diverted attention from biblical narrative, poetry, and prophecy as literature, treating them instead as more or less distorted historical records. The characteristic move was to infer the existence of some book that preceded the one we have—the lost documents that were combined to make Genesis as it has come down to us, the lost Aramaic Gospel, the lost "sayings-source" used by Matthew and Luke, and so on. The effect of this practice was curious: one spoke of the existing books primarily as evidence of what must once have been available in an original closer to what actually happened. That was their real value—as substitutes for what had unfortunately been lost.206

In literary studies New Criticism207 developed in response to this neglect of the literary text, and somewhat later the literary turn developed in biblical


studies to fill the parallel gap. Alter and Kermode rightly identify Erich Auerbach’s remarkable *Mimesis* (1946; ET, 1953) as a landmark in this literary turn. The literary turn in biblical studies has been traced from the growing awareness of the limitations of the historical-critical method through canon criticism and New Criticism (including Muilenburg’s rhetorical criticism) to the narratology of Alter, Berlin, and Sternberg and parallel developments in New Testament studies.

In 1981, Alter was able to write that “over the last few years, there has been growing interest in literary approaches among the younger generation of biblical scholars . . . but, while useful explications of particular texts have begun to appear, there have been as yet no major works of criticism, and certainly no satisfying overview of the poetics of the Hebrew Bible.” Al­ter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is such an overview, but Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is the major work on Old Testament narrative. Gunn rightly noted that “Sternberg’s recent book on poetics moves such a narratology into a whole new dimension of discrimination and sophistication and will be fundamental to the emerging generation of narrative critics.”

The literary turn has radical implications for historical criticism. What was a doublet, thereby signaling a source, is now an example of careful, artistic repetition. Some have practiced literary analysis of the Bible without concerning themselves much with historical issues. But clearly the historical turn is not unaffected by the literary turn. Sternberg, Tom Wright, Thiselton, and others rightly argue for a careful integration of the historical and literary dimensions of the Bible, as well as the ideological or theological.

For Sternberg, seeing narrative technique as part of the text itself means taking the historical construction of the text seriously if one is going to come...
to grips with the functional purpose of biblical narrative. Sternberg is highly critical of the tendency to categorize Old Testament narratives as fiction. Fiction and history cannot, in Sternberg’s view, be distinguished by form but only in terms of overall purpose. When the Old Testament narratives are assessed by this criterion, “the product is neither historicized fiction nor fictionalized history, but historiography pure and uncompromising.” In Sternberg’s view, everything points in this direction. The Israelite obsession with memory of the past, that memory’s significance for the present, and Israel’s uniqueness in this respect in the ancient Near East—these factors all confirm that the Old Testament narratives are making a strong historical truth claim. “Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results.”

Certainly Sternberg’s approach is contested! But it indicates well the way in which the literary turn complicates the historical turn.

The substance of Sternberg’s theory of biblical narratology is found in the first three chapters of his Poetics. The remaining chapters flesh out this theory in exegetical examples. Sternberg defines poetics as “the systematic working or study of literature as such.” It is important to Sternberg that biblical narrative is a work of literature so that in a poetics such as his, the discipline and its object come together. He stresses this in opposition to biblical scholars who see “literary approaches” to the Bible as the conscious imposition of alien categories on the Old Testament text. For Sternberg, the authors of the biblical narratives have used narrative techniques to convey their message, and poetics is a study of these techniques. Consequently, at the very outset of his Poetics he indicates his understanding of narrative as functional discourse and sees poetics as research into how this discourse functions. Sternberg’s opening paragraph is a ringing affirmation of communication as the context within which narrative interpretation takes place. “Biblical narrative is oriented to an addressee and regulated by a purpose or set of purposes involving the addressee. Hence our primary business as readers is to make purposive sense of it.” Recognition of the genre of the text alone is insufficient: “Unless firmly anchored in the relations between narrator and audience, therefore, formalism degenerates into a new mode of atomism.”

216. Ibid., 32.
217. Ibid., 2.
218. In this sense Sternberg’s poetics represents a sort of textual realism far removed from the pluralism and indeterminacy of postmodernism.
219. Ibid., 1.
220. Ibid., 2.
Sternberg regards the discernment of *objectified or embodied intention* as crucial: "Such intention fulfils a crucial role, for communication presupposes a speaker who resorts to certain linguistic and structural tools in order to produce certain effects on the addressee; the discourse accordingly supplies a network of clues to the speaker's intention."\(^{221}\)

Taking authorial intention seriously means that source criticism and narratology should not be set against each other. This is especially so considering the gap in sociocultural context between our time and that of the origin of the biblical narratives. We can never fully bridge this gap, but this does not mean we cannot try. In fact, this is the only alternative: "Once the choice turns out to lie between reconstructing the author's intention and licensing the reader's invention, there is no doubt where most of us stand."\(^{222}\) The historicity of the text cannot be avoided; at the very least all scholars acknowledge that the language and its meaning require historical reconstruction. Yet the nature of the source criticism we engage in needs careful attention, and Sternberg is very critical of much that has been called source criticism. There is an inevitable tension between source and discourse, but Sternberg appeals for a closer partnership between the two; indeed, he maintains that the two cannot but work together, and neither has the primacy over the other.

Frequently it is falsely assumed that the Bible as a religious text is in antithesis to the Bible as literature. For Sternberg, this is a false antithesis. In the ancient world highly poetic and literary material was regularly highly ideological and attended to for instruction. "The question is how rather than whether the literary coexists with the social, the doctrinal, the philosophical."\(^{223}\) Representation is never to be set against evaluation, although the extent to which these aspects dominate in any piece of literature will vary. Only if the Bible were ideological in an extreme form of didactic would taking it seriously as literature be inadmissible. However, "if biblical narrative is didactic, then it has chosen the strangest way to go about its business. For the narrator breaks every law in the didacticist's decalogue. Anything like preaching from the narrative pulpit is conspicuous for its absence."\(^{224}\) Narrative is the means whereby the Bible presents its message; the two, narrative technique and message, are not to be set against each other.

So now it is time we stopped seeing the techniques of narrative as *literary* techniques. "What determines literariness is not the mere presence but the

\(^{221}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{222}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{223}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{224}\) Ibid., 37–38.
dominance of the poetic function, the control it exerts over all the rest."

Narrative techniques are as much the prerogative of the historical-biblical narratives as of fictional texts, and the presence of these techniques must not be seen as compromising the texts' ideological nature.

So how does the aesthetic aspect relate to the ideological in biblical narrative? "Biblical narrative emerges as a complex, because multifunctional, discourse. Functionally speaking, it is regulated by a set of three principles: ideological, historiographic, and aesthetic." The ideological is particularly prominent in the law sections of the Pentateuch and in prophetic moralizing, for example. The historiographic is prominent in the names of places, people, and etiologies. The aesthetic is in high profile in the narratives. The relation of these three principles is one of coordination and tense complementarity. Sternberg sums up the point at which the three merge as "the drama of reading." "They join forces to originate a strategy of telling that casts reading as a drama, interpretation as an ordeal that enacts and distinguishes the human predicament." The ideological principle is seen in the foolproof aspect of the narratives; the aesthetic is seen in the exposition of biblical doctrine in a narrative that has built into it the cognitive antithesis between God and humanity.

Sternberg stresses the need not to impose a poetics on the biblical narratives but to work so as to allow the biblical poetics to emerge:

"In practice as well as in methodology, the gravest danger to the literary approaches lurks in their imposition of models that do not fit the Bible, nor indeed . . . literature in general. . . . In most of the theoretical work I have done, on narrative and other subjects, the Bible has proved a corrective to widely held doctrines about literary structure and analysis, often a pointer to the formation of alternatives."

Sternberg's work is in a class of its own, and it will be in the center of discussion of biblical narrative for a long time to come.

At its best the literary turn has proved remarkably fruitful in biblical interpretation ranging from Alter's work to Clines's study on The Theme of the Pentateuch, Wenham's work on Genesis, Van Leeuwen's study on Proverbs, Joel Green's work on Luke, and so forth, as well as myriad articles and studies of parts of biblical books. There is no part of the study of the Bible that has not benefited in some way from literary analysis.

225. Ibid., 40.
226. Ibid., 41.
227. Ibid., 46.
228. Ibid., 56-57.
Closely related to this is the recovery of intertextuality and the many ways in which it has opened up the network of connections between biblical texts. Fishbane's work in particular but also Sailhamer's has been significant in this area in Old Testament studies, spawning some highly creative works on intertextuality, although not always focusing sufficiently on the indispensable historical formation of texts, as noted by Sternberg above. No one has warned so strongly against the danger and limits of treating the Bible solely as literature as has George Steiner in his review of The Literary Guide to the Bible. This reminds us again that an urgent need is a hermeneutic that integrates the historical, literary, and kerygmatic dimensions of biblical texts, a matter to which we attend in following chapters.

The Postmodern Turn

So-called postmodernism began in literary studies and was then extended to a critique of Western culture as a whole in the 1980s. It has impacted biblical studies from both these places. Christopher Norris argues that "literary theory, through its colonizing drive into other disciplines, bids fair to reverse that entire movement of progressive or enlightened critique which has sought to establish adequate protocols for the discrimination of truth from falsehood, of factual from fictive or historical from mythic modes of utterance." Whether we agree with Norris's articulation of the dangers of postmodernism or not, the postmodern debate has questioned central assumptions of modernity, including its notions of history, and it was inevitable that such questioning would eventually threaten the dominance of that quintessentially modern method in biblical studies: historical criticism.

Interwoven with this is the fact that since the literary turn in biblical studies, biblical scholars have kept an eye on developments in literary studies and the door open to importing their methods. Thus it is no surprise that literary theory's colonizing drive should find a receptive audience in biblical studies. By the late 1960s, New Criticism was being replaced by structuralism, and then came the poststructuralist developments, and it was only a matter of time before Fish, Rorty, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, and the like were being applied in Old Testament studies.

The contours of the postmodern landscape are not always easily identifiable. Postmodernism is nearly synonymous with diversity and pluralism, and one needs to take care not to impose contours on diverse positions. Thus Rorty is to be distinguished from Derrida, and Derrida from Baudrillard, and so on. Nevertheless, it is clear that in its more extreme forms, postmodernism constitutes a radical challenge to biblical studies, whether historical or literary. With its wild pluralism, its view of texts as radically indeterminate, and its suspicion of getting behind texts, much postmodernism renders the historical-critical enterprise deeply problematic. If “the past is not discovered or found, . . . but created and represented by the historian as a text, which in turn is consumed by the reader,” where does this leave the enterprise of historical criticism?

The depth of the postmodern challenge in this respect should be recognized. Postmodernism questions the foundational assumptions of modernity so that its challenge to an enterprise like historical criticism is not always immediately obvious but at a deep, philosophical level. As long as the standard narrative of modernity as rational progress was assumed, historical criticism did not need to worry too much about its philosophical presuppositions. Indeed, to this day the myth continues to be entertained that historical criticism has no philosophical presuppositions. But postmodernism queries such objective neutrality and insists that particular epistemologies and views of history underlie the practice of historical criticism. If such views are to be maintained, then their basis must be argued for: the basis cannot just be assumed.

It is particularly via postmodern views of history that historical criticism and any view of the biblical narratives as accurately representing what happened are challenged. Munslow, in his *Deconstructing History*, discerns three current options in historiography: first, reconstructionism; second, constructionism; and third, deconstructionism. Reconstructionism believes that the more carefully we write history, the closer we will get to what actually happened. Constructionism refers to the approaches to history that invoke general laws, Marxism being the most well-known example. Munslow gathers postmodern approaches together under the label of “deconstructionism,” and this includes authors such as Hayden White and Keith Jenkins. Such approaches stress the fact that history writing is always an example of literary production, with all the attendant complexities that brings.

Central to postmodern debates about history is the question of the extent to which history can accurately represent the past through narrative.

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233. J. D. Levenson’s *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) is an important text in terms of the current status of historical criticism.
Scholars point to the unavoidable interpretative and hermeneutical element in all history writing, and many draw radical conclusions therefrom. This postmodern emphasis on the linguistic and narrative nature of history raises profound questions about historiography, whether one agrees with the likes of Hayden White or not. What kind of knowledge production is history writing? History always brings a narrative grid to bear on its telling of the past, and Munslow, for example, suggests that "history is best viewed epistemologically as a form of literature producing knowledge as much by its aesthetic or narrative structure as by any other criteria." History is a form of narrative, and as such is part of the historical process: "All such narratives make over events and explain why they happened, but are overlaid by the assumptions held by the historian about the forces influencing the nature of causality." Postmodernism has penetrated deeply into biblical studies, and there is hardly an area where some postmodern approach is not available. The postmodern turn problematizes the literary and historical turn in biblical studies. Indeed, its strength lies in problematizing, not in offering constructive ways forward. This has had two effects:

1. It came so soon on the heels of the literary turn that the latter was problematized before it had been fully appropriated in biblical studies.
2. The inability of postmodern approaches to offer constructive ways forward has meant that historical criticism lingers as a kind of default mode for many scholars.

In my view postmodernism is now in decline, and the question is, what will emerge now? A positive development, which we come to below, is the renaissance of theological interpretation, but it needs to be a mode of interpretation that is not just one more method on the smorgasbord. To accomplish this, it will itself need to come to grips with the turns that precede it even as it reaches back behind historical criticism to retrieve healthy modes of theological interpretation. In my view an urgent need is to further the engagement of the literary turn with historical criticism and to begin the consequent rethinking of what lies behind the biblical text, even as we direct our energies to the world opened up in front of the text. The strength of historical criticism is its rigorous attention to the data of the text; its weakness is the hermeneutic with which it handles this data.

234. To taste the radicality of this, see F. S. Burnett, "Historiography," in A. K. M. Adams, Postmodern Biblical Interpretation, 106–12.
236. Ibid., 10.
Take Old Testament law, for example. It is ridiculous to suggest that there was no development in Old Testament law since this would violate all we know about how law develops as a society matures. Historical criticism has fingered the data on this matter and alerted us to the important differences between the collections of Old Testament law. But, in the light of the literary turn, we need to be at work constructing better hypotheses about the development of Old Testament law than JEDP.

Amid Contemporary Pluralism: A Theological Turn?

In his inaugural lecture at Oxford University, John Barton mentioned the crisis in Old Testament studies and that an emerging response is to call for a *religious* hermeneutic. 237 Barton is suspicious of this move and argues for a recovery of Enlightenment values as the center of Old Testament studies. Barton is right in noticing that an increasing number of scholars are arguing, in response to the postmodern turn, that we need a *theological* hermeneutic in biblical studies, and nowadays works in what is fuzzily called theological interpretation are springing up all over the place. The minority renewal I refer to is a broad church umbrella, including such scholars as Stephen Fowl, Tom Wright, Brevard Childs, Christopher Seitz, Walter Brueggemann, Walter Moberly, John Webster, Francis Watson, Kevin Vanhoozer, Francis Martin, the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar, and others.

It would be an unfortunate mistake to suppose that historical criticism produced no theological interpretation; von Rad’s theological readings of Old Testament traditions and sources and his classic *The Wisdom of Israel* belie any such view. However, such works are the exception rather than the rule, and theological interpretation has emerged partially out of frustration with historical-critical scholarship. Karl Barth, Childs’s canonical approach, and Yale’s postliberal theology are major ingredients in this renewed interest in theological interpretation. Childs has long argued that the goal of the interpretation of Christian Scripture must be to understand both Testaments as witness to the selfsame divine reality: the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Although this theological turn is now gathering momentum in response to the pluralism and nihilistic direction of (some) postmodernism, Childs’s extensive corpus has played a major role in laying the foundation for a theological, canonical hermeneutic in biblical studies. The theological turn is in its early days in biblical studies. Inevitably, as with Childs, a theological turn will involve going back to premodern

readings of biblical texts and finding traditions that can be reappropriated and developed in our day.

There are (at least) two elements to this theological turn. One aspect is that of simply getting on with reading the Bible theologically. Thus scholars such as Christopher Seitz invoke the plain sense of Scripture, allow a limited role for historical (canonical-historical) criticism, and get on with interpretation in relation to the church and Christian doctrine. In his *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, Francis Watson argues for a theological hermeneutic in biblical interpretation, but he is quite clear that the goal is a theological hermeneutic within which an exegesis oriented primarily towards theological issues can come into being. This is therefore *not an exercise in general hermeneutics*. . . . The hermeneutic or interpretative paradigm towards which the following chapters move is a theological rather than a literary one, and the idea that a literary perspective is, as such, already “theological” seems to me to be without foundation.

A somewhat different approach is to argue that we need a theology of history (and literature, etc.) to fund biblical interpretation. Neill and Tom Wright identify this need:

Similarly, there has, alas, been little progress in the areas of a theology of history, or of New Testament ecclesiology. It is an exciting idea, as was mooted in the first edition of this work, that “An understanding of history which is incompatible with a Christian doctrine of revelation is bound to land the New Testament scholar in grave perplexities; a true theological understanding of history would not of itself solve any New Testament problems, but it would, so to speak, hold the ring within which a solution can be found.” But where are the scholars sufficiently familiar with actual history-writing, sufficiently at home in philosophy and the history of ideas, and sufficiently committed to the study of the New Testament, to undertake the task?

Wright himself makes considerable progress in this direction in his *The New Testament and the People of God*. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that “the
best general hermeneutics is a trinitarian hermeneutics. Yes, the Bible should be interpreted ‘like any other book’; but every book should be interpreted with norms that we derive and establish from Trinitarian theology. Clearly there are different emphases among proponents of theological interpretation. Whatever the precise view, theological interpretation undoubtedly impacts how we think about literature, history, and biblical interpretation.

Thus, as we advance the cause of theological interpretation in our attempt to renew biblical interpretation, it is important to think carefully about the relation between the theological turn and the other three turns—namely, the historical, the literary, and the postmodern. There is also the vital question of how these turns relate to more fundamental philosophical or paradigm shifts. Indeed, the postmodern turn, as we noticed, forces the depth issue of philosophical presuppositions to the surface. In a different context, Botha comments, “The question I found intriguing was whether these ‘turns’ were representative of fundamental philosophical or epistemological revolutions, gestalt shifts, ‘metaphoric revolutions’ in the history and philosophy of science, or whether they were in fact no more than manifestations and variations of one overall epistemological root metaphor or basic metaphor, characteristic of the epistemology of the twentieth century.”

In this way a model of turns helps us to start to get at the variety of factors involved in any attempt to reassess biblical interpretation today. There are complex archaeological layers to modern biblical interpretation. In my opinion an example of work that seeks to take these multiple dimensions seriously is Tom Wright’s major New Testament project on Christian Origins and the Question of God. We may not agree with every detail of his execution of the project, but it is to his credit that he has attended to the philosophical, literary, historical, and theological dimensions of reading the New Testament today. Nothing less will suffice for a full-blown recovery of theological interpretation today.

Conclusion: An Invitation to the Feast

In his foreword to Thomas Oden’s *Requiem*, which he heads “An Invitation to the Feast,” Richard John Neuhaus says,
More and more “young fogeys” like Oden are discovering the truth that is “ever ancient, ever new” (Augustine). It is called the catholic faith, and it is a feast to which he invites us. It is a movable feast, still developing under the guidance of the Spirit. Oden is like cinema’s “Auntie Mame,” who observed that life is a banquet and most poor slobs are starving to death. Origen, Irenaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley—the names fall trippingly from Oden’s tongue like a gourmet surveying a most spectacular table. Here are arguments you can sink your teeth into, conceptual flights of intoxicating complexity, and truths to die for. Far from the table, over there, way over there, is American theological education, where prodigal academics feed starving students on the dry husks of their clever unbelief.244

One need only reflect on our narrative of the history of biblical interpretation to realize just how absolutely central is the Bible to this feast of the catholic faith. And yet one can so easily replace “American theological education” with “academic biblical interpretation” in the above quote: such is the barren wilderness of so much that goes under the name of biblical studies nowadays. Even in our years of wild pluralism and tolerance of a great diversity of readings of the Bible, this does not necessarily mean that interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture is welcome.245 Theological interpretation is fine in seminaries but not in the academy.

And in our seminaries, where one is more likely to find a concern with the Bible as Scripture, good academic work in the service of profound interpretation of the Bible as Scripture is rare. There has been an (understandable) tendency for orthodox scholars to fight the battle for Scripture where opponents have attacked. Thus a huge amount of Christian energy has been devoted to historical issues during the twentieth century—far less, alas, to interpretation of the Bible as God’s address.

I learned from the Canadian aesthetician Calvin Seerveld that practicing Christian scholarship today will often mean going back in history in one’s discipline until one finds a healthy tradition, which one can then transfuse into the present.246 Theological interpretation has a growing number but...
still few healthy, contemporary examples, whether we look to theology or biblical studies. Frederick Dale Bruner’s two-volume work on Matthew, *The Christbook* and *The Churchbook*, stands out as a rich exception. Childs, who is himself another great exception to this rule in biblical studies, notes, for example, that although “scripture functions toward sanctification,” there has been little attention during the reign of historical criticism to reading the Bible as a whole for ethics. In this respect Oliver O’Donovan’s work is in a class of its own, combining exegesis and theology in a style reminiscent of Karl Barth. Theological interpretation is thus in urgent need of Seerveld’s strategy; my hope is that these three chapters on the history of biblical interpretation will alert readers to fecund sources for such a bloodline for theological interpretation today, as well as highlighting where work needs to be done.

For those of us committed to Christian/theological interpretation of the Bible, we are heirs to an extraordinary tradition, truly a feast. It is a feast, however, that has been seriously contaminated in modernity and late modernity. No less a philosopher than Gadamer declared, “Enlightenment critique is primarily directed against the religious tradition of Christianity—i.e., the Bible. . . . This is the real radicality of the modern Enlightenment compared to all other movements of enlightenment: it must assert itself against the Bible and dogmatic interpretations of it.” This prejudice is evident for all to see in biblical studies today.

How then should we proceed?

1. We should continue to engage the mainstream, both in terms of learning from it and engaging it critically. This is no call for withdrawal from the debates of our age. A major task for us is to reengage historical criticism and to recontextualize its insights in a healthier paradigm.

2. We must, however, move beyond engaging with where others set the agenda, move to attending to agendas arising from the gospel itself, agendas that may be crucial for both church and world today, yet in which mainstream scholarship may have no interest. Alvin Plantinga’s inaugural lecture at Notre Dame ought to be compulsory reading for all of us with its call to boldness, courage, and integrity. Examples that come to mind are Richard art historical tradition in your own blood and pioneer its contribution in our day” (197). Note also 182–91, encouraging and vital comments about Christian work as a minority culture. Gordon Wenham’s use of Hengstenberg in pentateuchal criticism is a good example of this; see Wenham, “The Date of Deuteronomy,” 15–20.


Baukham’s work on the Gospels and eyewitness testimony and his edited volume *The Gospels for all Christians*, as well as the highly creative project on the New Testament that Tom Wright is engaged in. In an earlier chapter I have indicated the fundamental importance of biblical theology for biblical interpretation. And yet there are few signs of a resurgence of biblical theology comparable to the heyday of von Rad, Eichrodt, Vriezen, Vos, and, more recently, Childs and Scobie. We need major, rigorous work done on the internal unity of Scripture as a whole.

3. Very few of us have been trained for the tasks at hand, and we need to face this directly. If the renascent theological interpretation is to fulfill its potential, then practitioners and emerging scholars will need to acquire the needed skills. With foreign language skills in steady demise, both ancient and contemporary, we will need to recover them. We will need to explore the story of biblical interpretation in depth, working out the key turning points and how to orient ourselves in relation to them, identifying streams from which we can most fruitfully resource a recovery of theological interpretation, and so on. Philosophical and theological expertise will be indispensable. And so too will be a sense of where we are in Western culture at present so that our work can be done at that crossroads between the biblical story and our cultural stories, the place of true mission, which Newbigin describes as a place of painful tension.

4. Biblical interpretation must make its goal attending to the address of God *for all of our life*. The most rigorous exegesis must be practiced in the spirit of listening, and this must always be in the service of listening for God’s address. Such careful listening will confirm that “the Author of life” has a word to say for all of life as he has made it. Theological interpretation cannot restrict itself to church doctrine; it has to help us hear God’s address for all of life: politics, economics, family life and sexuality, business, art, sport, and on and on.

5. Finally, I return to my point in chapter 2 that ecclesial reception of the Bible is primary, and the test of academic theological interpretation will be whether it deepens ecclesial reception. Healthy biblical interpretation of the utmost rigor in the service of the Lord Christ can add immeasurably to the messianic feast. It can arise from lectio divina, return there continually, and again and again find itself in the presence of the living Christ.