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Biblical Criticism: A Common-Sense Approach to the Bible

Applying our critical faculties to study the Bible, asking questions about its origin, context, and genre.

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Criticizing the Torah?

The term “biblical criticism” is an unfortunate one, because it gives the impression that the scholars who practice it are engaged in criticizing the Bible, in a hostile sense. In fact, like the related term “literary criticism,” it refers not to hostility towards the text, but the application of one’s critical faculties to reading it.[1] The term seems to have arisen in the seventeenth century, to refer to the use of humanistic insights in reading ancient texts, and thus also the Bible.[2]

Historically, this has involved asking three questions:

1. **Origin**—How did the biblical text come into being—when, where, and why?
2. **Context**—What kind of thought-world does the book come from: what are its presuppositions and mental background?
3. **Genre**—What type of literature (what genre) does any given biblical book (or section of a biblical book) belong to?

People in antiquity sometimes asked these questions, but Baruch Spinoza (b. 1632) appears to be the first to deal with them systematically and make them the basis of a total approach to the Bible. His rationalist approach got him expelled from his synagogue in Amsterdam and declared a heretic, as it challenged some basic tenets of Judaism (and Christianity).

Spinoza and the Desacralizing of the Torah

For Spinoza, as part of the Jewish community, the immediate and most obvious clash between a critical approach and traditional faith had to do with the authorship of the Pentateuch. The Rabbinic Jewish doctrine of תורה מן השמים, “Torah from Heaven,” affirms that the Torah is a document transmitted to Moses by God. Traditional Christians often have a similar approach, claiming that it was written by Moses under divine direction.

As soon as we discuss the Torah’s origins—where, when, and why it was composed—as open questions, we are already raising the possibility, it would seem, that it does *not* come from heaven. Some theologians have developed complex theories according to which the Bible can be both a human product and a divine revelation at the same time,[4] but such approaches often feel insufficient to the more orthodox religious thinker.

The other two questions also lead in directions problematic to classical faith. The idea of the underlying thought-world, which Spinoza was probably the first thinker to highlight, often underscores that certain features of the Bible’s way of thinking are simply incommensurable with our own.

The question of genre implies that biblical books can be assessed and classified like any other literature, which too may be felt to undermine their unique status as divine communication. This explains the general tension between biblical critics and traditional believers, and the feeling shared by many traditionally orthodox Christians and Jews that Bible critics have “taken away the Bible.” The Jewish community, however, has an additional reason for being suspicious of biblical criticism, which is less about the approach itself and more about a specific version of it, or to be more accurate, a specific scholar’s use of it.

Julius Wellhausen’s Theory

Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) was perhaps the greatest, but also the most controversial, of late nineteenth-century Protestant biblical critics. Wellhausen’s work, as seen above all in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*,[5] concentrates on the origin and dating of the Torah and the thought-world its various component parts inhabit (questions 1 and 2).

He inherited, though he also greatly refined and brilliantly and concisely summarized, the theory that the Pentateuch was the product of the weaving together of four underlying sources, older written documents that a final editor combined in stages to produce the somewhat rambling narrative, containing also a massive collection of laws. The result of this editing or redaction is the Hexateuch, the Torah plus the book of Joshua, as we more or less have it now.

Wellhausen’s main concern was with the date of the legal section that runs from the middle of Exodus, all the way through Leviticus and ends in the middle of Numbers. It is nowadays normally known as P, the Priestly source (Wellhausen called it Q[6]). Previous critics had for the most part thought of this as the oldest part of the Torah. Even if it was not literally “from heaven,” it was of hoary antiquity, and Jews and Christians alike could be assured that it was the basis of the life and practice of ancient Israel.

But Wellhausen did a simple and obvious thing, which had enormous implications. He examined the historical books of the Bible, and the books of the pre-exilic prophets (Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah, and so on), for evidence that the priestly system was in force in the early days of Israel, and he found none. On the contrary, it is only in post-exilic texts (Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, Daniel) that we find clear allusions to it.

So Wellhausen found himself in agreement with Karl Heinrich Graf (1815–1869) that “the law was later than the prophets” (*lex post prophetas*). P was not the foundation document of ancient Israel, but of Judaism after the exile. Not only did it not go back to Moses, it did not go back much before Ezra: it was a work of the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. at the earliest.

Ancient Israel, characterized by the prophets, and the legalistic Priestly religion of the Second Temple period, were two distinct things, and Judaism, which developed from the latter, could not claim to have truly ancient roots. It had been invented, we might almost say, by postexilic thinkers.

Judging Judaism as Legalistic and Non-Spiritual

Wellhausen’s point goes well beyond the question of dating, and reflects a value-judgment about P, which he saw as representing the introduction of a rules-based religion, inimical to the freedom of the spirit we find in the great prophets. For example, towards the end of his *Prolegomena*, he writes (pp. 508–509):

It is not easy to find points of view from which to pronounce on the character of Judaism…. It lives on the stores of the past, but it is not simply the total of what had been previously acquired; it is full of new impulses and has an entirely different physiognomy from that of Hebrew antiquity, so much so that it is hard even to catch a likeness.

Judaism is everywhere historically comprehensible, and yet it is a mass of antinomies. We are struck with the free flight of thought and the deep inwardness of feeling which are found in some passages in the Wisdom and in the Psalms; but, on the other hand, we meet with a pedantic asceticism which is far from lovely, and with pious wishes the greediness of which is ill-concealed; and these unedifying features are the dominant ones of the system.

Monotheism is worked out to its furthest consequences, and at the same time is enlisted in the service of the narrowest selfishness… The Creator of heaven and earth becomes the manager of a petty scheme of salvation; the living God descends from His throne to make way for the law. The law thrusts itself in everywhere; it commands and blocks up access to heaven… as far as it can, it takes the soul out of religion and spoils morality.

Wellhausen continues in this vein, and in the next paragraph shows us where he is going:

The Gospel develops hidden impulses of the Old Testament, but it is a protest against the ruling tendency of Judaism.

Wellhausen was a Romantic as well as a Lutheran, and for him spontaneity and freedom from legalistic constraints was part of true religion, something that the New Testament and Protestant Christianity succeeded in recapturing. In contrast, Judaism—a religion of law in traditional Lutheran terms—represents a decline from the religiosity of pre-exilic Israel to a narrow adherence to a detailed and constricting code.

In this, Wellhausen did not differ much from his Christian contemporaries,[7] but no one before had thought through the implications for the history of Israel and Judaism with such ruthless consistency. Unsurprisingly, this conclusion was offensive to many Jews. Solomon Schechter (1847–1915), seen in retrospect as the founder of the Conservative movement in the U.S., made the point forcefully in an address titled [“Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism,”](http://www.bombaxo.com/2009/06/27/higher-criticism-higher-anti-semitism/) delivered in 1903:

The genesis of this Higher anti-Semitism is partly, though not entirely… contemporaneous with the genesis of the so-called Higher criticism of the Bible. Wellhausen’s Prolegomena and History are teeming with aperçus full of venom against Judaism, and you cannot wonder that he was rewarded by one of the highest orders which the Prussian Government had to bestow.

Wellhausen was in truth opposed to Judaism as a religious system. Nevertheless, he was not anti-Semitic in the sense of hating Jews or wishing them harm, either individually or collectively. Moreover, Judaism in his writings was often a placeholder for Catholicism, whose canon laws and rituals seemed to violate the spirit of pure religion in the minds of many Protestants. That said, Jewish readers could certainly be forgiven for not appreciating these nuances.

Separating the Empirical Approach from the Value Judgment

Wellhausen’s dismissive attitude to Judaism and Catholicism must be judged separately from his scholarly idea of testing the antiquity of P against the evidence of the other books in the Hebrew Bible. I believe he showed convincingly that First Isaiah, from the late eighth and early seventh century, to take just one example, did not inhabit the same thought-world as P, and was not familiar with the priestly system.

Isaiah’s opposition to sacrifice, for example (1:10-15), is hard to reconcile with any idea that P was the foundation stone of his religious sensibilities. Anyone who wants to see matters differently must meet Wellhausen’s theory on empirical grounds.

A number of scholars, not all of them Jewish, have attempted to rebut Wellhausen’s hypothesis. Most recently, Jan Joosten and Ronald Hendel have argued on linguistic grounds that the language of P material in the Torah is as old as that in the historical books, so that the theory that P is post-exilic founders on that basis.[8] And it is possible that the sacrifices the prophets condemn were being carried out in accordance with some sort of regulation, which may have been not unlike those in P.

Yet even if Wellhausen’s historical conclusions are accepted, this does not necessitate accepting his value-judgment. One could fully accept the late date of P but argue that it in no way represents a decline, rather the discovery of a new and beautiful religious ritual—not ritualistic—system continuous with today’s rabbinic Judaism, which is a precious living tradition to be affirmed, not sniped at.

The kind of delight in the Torah we find in Psalm 119, for example, is almost certainly a product of what Wellhausen would have called “late Judaism” (nowadays known as “early Judaism” or “Second Temple Judaism”), yet it is the expression of a sentiment that a religious person of any faith should be able to appreciate and evaluate positively.[9]

Genre in the Bible

The third question, that of determining the genre of a work, was generally overlooked by Wellhausen. When studying the historical books, for example, he seems simply to have assumed that even when they were inaccurate or false, they had a historiographical intention, and was unaware of suggestions that would be made by later scholars to the effect that they were deliberate fiction or else ancient folklore.

One important scholar who turned his full attention to this question was Wellhausen’s slightly younger contemporary, Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932). Much of Gunkel’s work led him to speculations on the prehistory of certain texts, which appeared to derive from oral prototypes, such as many of the stories in Genesis and the poems in the book of Psalms.[10] Modern readers who assume—surely rightly—that the story of the creation of the world in Genesis 1 should be classified as myth rather than as historiography, are following in Gunkel’s footsteps.

But before Gunkel took up the question of genre in a systematic way, it was again Spinoza who first posed the question decisively. Writing about the story of Adam and Eve, he noted that “some people” read the story as literal truth, implying that he himself saw it in a different way, as an illustrative story from which no direct historical truth could be expected.

He applied to much of the Bible the sentiment summed up by the English poet Philip Sydney, in the pithy saying “As for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.” In this approach, the Bible is not the kind of literature from which accurate historical information can be extracted but is poetical in character.

Nowadays most biblical critics would regard this as only partially the case. There is historiography as well as myth and poetry in the Bible. The basic point, however, is an important one: until we know what kind of material we are dealing with, we don’t know what questions it is sensible to expect it to answer for us. Thus, grappling with genre is an essential component in biblical criticism, and a large part of its contribution to appreciating the Bible for what it is, rather than what we might like it to be.[11]

The Bible as a Human Product

Sometimes biblical criticism is seen as a set of procedures or methods applied to the text, summed up as “the historical-critical method.” But, in truth, criticism is not a method, but an attitude. It asks of the Bible common-sense questions that with any other text we would regard as obviously sensible and natural, but which doctrines of the divine origin of Scripture tend to block out. Thus, its conclusions can be explosive for traditional believers.

Judaism is probably better placed than some forms of Christianity to assimilate and appreciate biblical criticism. It can be seen as one practical working-out of the rabbinic dictum, found in a number of places in the Talmud that, דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם, Torah speaks in human language (see, e.g., b. Nedarim 3a-b). Also, Rabbinic Judaism depends less than at least Protestant varieties of Christianity on the Bible taken “neat” i.e., interpreted as is. Instead, the rabbis insisted on the importance of the Bible as interpreted by tradition. Catholicism in this way is similar to Judaism, though it interprets the Bible in a different way.

In that context asking critical questions about the origins and genre and thought world of the Bible may be seen as interesting and important, without affecting the basic core of the religion. That is not to deny that some of the conclusions biblical critics have come to can be quite startling within a faith context, especially if particular beliefs are seen as central to a given faith.[12] But once one has seen the excitement of asking critical questions about the Bible it is impossible to block them out of one’s mind.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/biblical-criticism-a-common-sense-approach-to-the-bible)

1. For a book length treatment of this subject, see my The Nature of Biblical Criticism (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).
2. *Critique* and “criticks” are alternative forms.  Among the first to use it appears to have been Richard Simon in his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*(1678). See Reinhart Kosellek, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathenogensis of Modern Society* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), 105, and my *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, ch. 5.
3. See the discussion in Graham I. Davies, “Introduction to the Pentateuch,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary,* ed. John Barton and John Muddiman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
4. For a brief survey of approaches suggested by traditional Jewish theologians over the past half century, see TABS Editors, [“Current Approaches,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/current-approaches) *TheTorah* (2013). See also *TheTorah*’s [Modern Faith](https://www.thetorah.com/categories/modern-faith) section for more recent attempts to deal with the problem of revelation and the Torah’s origin.  On the Christian side, see Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches* (London: SPCK, 2004).
5. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans., J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; repr. of, Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885); trans. of, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1883); repr. of, *Geschichte Israels 1*(Berlin: G. Reimer, 1878).
6. Q is short for *Quelle*, “source” in German.  But Q is nowadays used for a hypothetical source of the Christian Gospels, and is no longer used in Pentateuchal studies.
7. Wellhausen should not be singled out among nineteenth-century scholars for antisemitism: see the discussion by Lou Silberman, “Wellhausen and Judaism,” *Semeia* 25 (1983): 75–82 [p. 75].
8. Ronald S. Hendel and Jan Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
9. Editor’s note: For more on this psalm, see Shalom Holtz, [“Seeking Torah Seeking God: Psalm 119,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/seeking-torah-seeking-god-psalm-119) *TheTorah* (2013).
10. For English translations of some of Gunkel’s important works, see, Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020; repr. of, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); translation of, *Einleitung in die Psalmen : die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhöck&Ruprecht, 1933); Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997); trans. of, *Genesis*, 3rd ed., Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhöck&Ruprecht, 1910 [1901]); Hermann Gunkel and Heinrich Zimmern,*Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); trans. of, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit : eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1895).
11. See my discussion in *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).
12. Editor’s note: For some attempts to deal with these issues, see Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?,* 2nd ed., (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006; repr. of 1999); Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale, 2015). See also the symposium, [Revelation and Authority](https://www.thetorah.com/symposium/revelation-and-authority) (*TheTorah*, 2019) discussing the ideas in this book.