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The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship

This book is about understanding the Bible from two radically different points of view—that of the Bible’s ancient interpreters and that of modern biblical scholars (see above, “Preliminaries”). But how did people go from reading the Bible one way to reading it in the other? This chapter tells that story.

On a warm May afternoon in 1893, a man stood on trial for heresy in Washington, D.C. This circumstance might in itself appear surprising. The defendant was being tried by the Presbyterian Church, which had always prided itself on its tradition of intellectualism and an educated clergy. While disagreements about church teachings were not rare in the denomination, going as far as putting a man on trial for his beliefs was certainly an extreme step.¹ Such a trial might also appear ill-suited to the end of the nineteenth century, a time of great openness to new ideas. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had been published a full three decades earlier, and Einstein’s first writings on the theory of relativity were only twelve years away. America itself was a country of electric-powered machines and new-fangled telephones, a rising economic and political center with its own burgeoning literary and intellectual avant-garde. Across the Atlantic, Sigmund Freud was working out his ideas on sexuality and the unconscious; Pablo Picasso was twelve years old, James Joyce was eleven, and D. H. Lawrence was eight. Heresy?

Still more surprising was the man in the dock; Charles Augustus Briggs hardly seemed fitted to the role of heretic. In his youth, he had been an altogether traditional Presbyterian, distinguished only by the fervor of his belief. In his sophomore year at the University of Virginia, he presented himself for formal membership at the First Presbyterian Church of Charlottesville, and thereafter he became a committed evangelical Christian.² The tone of his faith in those early years is well captured by a letter he wrote to his sister Millie:

I trust you feel that you are a sinner. I trust that you know that Christ is your Savior, and I want to entreat you to go to him in prayer. I know by experience that Christ is precious, and that I would not give him up for the world. . . . Do you want to be separated from your brother and sister when they shall be with Jesus? Are you willing to be with the Devil in torment? You can decide the question in a moment.³

So great was Briggs’s sense of calling that he soon abandoned plans to go into his father’s highly prosperous business—Alanson Briggs, known as the “barrel king,” owned and operated the largest barrel factory in the United States—in order to devote himself entirely to a life of Christian preaching and teaching.
Briggs proved to be a gifted student of biblical Hebrew and ancient history, and he was soon ordained a Presbyterian minister. After having served as pastor to a small congregation in New Jersey for a time, he accepted a teaching post at one of the mainline seminaries of his day, the Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he lectured on Hebrew grammar and various biblical themes. He became, by all accounts, a highly respected scholar, acclaimed at a relatively young age as already belonging to "the foremost rank among the scholars of his day." Today, a century later, one of Briggs's books is still in print (a rare feat among academics!), a dictionary of biblical Hebrew that he coauthored with Francis Brown and S. R. Driver in 1906. Indeed, "BDB," as this dictionary is commonly known (for the initials of its three authors' last names), is still a required purchase for any graduate student undertaking serious work on the Hebrew Bible.

What, then, was this son of the Establishment, an expert in Hebrew lexicography and biblical theology, doing on trial? It all had to do with a speech he had made two years earlier, on the occasion of his being named to a prestigious new chair at Union Seminary. Briggs's inaugural address, delivered on the evening of January 20, 1891, went on for well more than an hour. It began innocently enough; as required of all such appointees at Presbyterian seminaries, he opened with a public declaration of his faith in the Bible and the church's system of governance:

I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; and I do now, in the presence of God and the Directors of this Seminary, solemnly and sincerely receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith [that is, the Presbyterian charter], as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures. I do also, in like manner, approve of the Presbyterian Form of Government; and I do solemnly promise that I will not teach or inculcate anything which shall appear to me to be subversive of the said system of doctrines, or of the principles of said Form of Government, so long as I shall continue to be a Professor in the Seminary.

But as Briggs went on, he touched on some of the more controversial issues facing Presbyterians in his day, particularly those matters having to do with his specialty, the Hebrew Bible. What he had to say—new, disturbing ideas about how the Bible came to be written, and the nature of its authority, as well as its place in the life of the church—shocked some of his listeners. He said that, contrary to what was claimed by many of his coreligionists, the Bible was not verbally inspired—that is, there was no reason to think that each and every word of it came from God. In fact, he said, it was obvious that the Bible contained numerous errors. What is more, he stated that it was now quite certain that the supposed authors of various books of the Bible—Moses and
David and Solomon and Ezra and the others—did not, in fact, write them; these books were the work of people whose true names would never be known. He asserted that the things described as miracles in the Old and New Testaments could not actually have “violate[d] the laws of nature or disturb[ed] its harmonies”—thus they were not, at least in the usual sense, miracles at all. In particular, he suggested, the supposedly miraculous acts of healing recounted in the Old and New Testaments might merely have been the result of “mind cure,* or hypnotism, or [some] other occult power.” Finally, he pointed out that while the Bible’s prophets frequently announced what God was to do in the future, many of their predictions had failed to come true; in fact, he said (a most surprising assertion for a Christian), most of the things predicted in the Old Testament about the coming of a Messiah had “not only never been fulfilled, but cannot now be fulfilled, for the reason that [their] own time has passed forever.”

What happened to Charles A. Briggs to cause him to say such things? The short answer is: he had become acquainted with modern biblical scholarship. Following his initial calling to the ministry, Briggs began to study the Bible in earnest, first in the United States and later in Germany, which was then the very center of modern biblical science. Once back in the United States, he had continued the line of his teachers’ research with his own; during his years as a professor and scholar, he had published widely on various topics connected with the Hebrew Bible and biblical theology. Many of the things Briggs proclaimed out loud in his inaugural address were thus not altogether new—they had been building up over decades of intensive research and publication.

Still, that hardly made Briggs’s assertions acceptable to everyone in the audience on that evening. Some of his listeners resented the confident, often aggressive tone of his remarks, and they liked even less his apparent endorsement of these new ideas. Despite the orthodox cast of his opening confession of faith, they found that most of his speech was anything but orthodox. Briggs seemed, they felt, out to undermine the Bible’s place as the very heart of Protestant belief and practice.

The evening ended with handshakes and congratulations, but as news of Briggs’s speech spread throughout the Presbyterian Church, his conservative opponents felt called upon to take action. They instituted formal proceedings within the church to have him suspended as a minister and removed from the academic chair to which he had just been appointed. No one who said such things could be considered a proper teacher for future Presbyterian ministers! The ensuing deliberations were long and complicated, moving from one judicial instance to the next. At first Briggs had been hopeful, believing that he could count on support from within the liberal wing of American Presby-

* The curing of a disease by the influence of the healer’s mind on the patient’s.
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...terians; but he had underestimated the strength and determination of his opponents. They pressed forward, and it was thus that Charles A. Briggs eventually found himself a defendant at the church's 1893 General Assembly in Washington, D.C., his future in the hands of the more than five hundred delegates gathered there.

The heresy trial was headline news across the country, closely followed by Americans of all faiths. (Indeed, according to one press report, a clergyman visiting India in 1892 was greeted with the query, "What is the latest phase of the Briggs case?") Charles A. Briggs may have been the immediate defendant in the proceeding, but in a larger sense it was the Bible itself that stood accused. What was it, really? Was it a special book unlike any other, the very word of God? Or was it, as Briggs seemed to suggest, principally (though not exclusively) the product of human industry, indeed, the work of men who lived in a time and place far removed from our own? Are its stories really true? If they are, was not even questioning their accuracy a sacrilege—a heresy, as Briggs's accusers charged? Or was it perfectly proper for biblical scholars, like all other university-trained researchers, to pursue their theories untrammeled, looking deeply into every aspect of the Bible and letting the chips fall where they may?

As the delegates rose one by one to cast their votes at the General Assembly, many of them must have felt that they were taking a stand on the Bible's own future. What are we to believe about it from now on? And how had it happened that this basically decent man, a professing Protestant deeply committed to his church, ended up espousing beliefs that so profoundly clashed with traditional faith? The two questions are actually intertwined and a useful point of introduction to this book, since a full answer to both must begin with a look back to the time of the Bible's own origins, more than three thousand years earlier.

A Tour of the Bible

The Hebrew Bible* is actually not one book, but an anthology. No one can say for sure how old its oldest parts are; this—like so many of the things discussed by Charles Briggs that night—is a matter of dispute between religious traditionalists and modern, university-style scholars. Almost all would agree that the very oldest parts of the text go back very far, at least to some time in the tenth century BCE—or considerably earlier. Its latest chapters are a little easier to date; they belong to the early second century BCE. As for the histor-

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* "Hebrew Bible" refers to the "Old Testament" of Christianity. As mentioned, this was Charles Briggs's specialty and the focus of his speech, as it is the focus of this book. Unless otherwise indicated, the word "Bible" alone herein refers to the Hebrew Bible.

§ Before the Common Era (= BC)
ical circumstances in which its various books were written, and exactly how they came to us, this too is a matter of dispute. According to traditionalists, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)—these books are collectively known as the Torah or the Pentateuch—were revealed by God to one man, Moses. Modern scholars are skeptical about the unity of the Pentateuch; according to them, as we shall see, these five books are actually the creation of at least four or five different authors from different periods in Israel’s history.

Whichever is the case with regard to the Pentateuch, no one denies that the rest of the Bible comes from different authors—it is, and always has been, a collection of texts, a kind of literary miscellany. In fact, the word “Bible” itself indicates as much: our English term comes from what was originally a Greek plural, ta biblia (“the books”—this is how the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria in ancient times referred to Judaism’s sacred library.

This library contains a range of different kinds of writings. The Pentateuch (Torah) is basically a history of Israel and its ancestors, starting with the very first human beings, Adam and Eve, and leading up to the time when the people of Israel were freed from slavery in Egypt and made their way to the border of the Promised Land. It is thus one long narrative, but interspersed with it are a great many laws. (The Ten Commandments are probably the most famous of these, but they are only one small part of the Pentateuch’s legal codes.) In fact, it is principally these laws that gave the Pentateuch its special character among ancient Jews and, to a certain extent, early Christians as well. They saw in the Pentateuch a great divine guidebook, its laws constituting God’s detailed set of do’s and don’ts for every human life. The Pentateuch was thus read and studied more than other books of the Bible in ancient times. (For this reason, we will devote a good deal of attention to these first five books; they contain many of the best known parts of the Bible and have always occupied a special place in the hearts of its readers.)

The Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses. From there, the historical narrative follows the Israelites and their new leader, Joshua, into the land of Canaan; the conquest of that land is narrated in the book of Joshua. Other books—Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah—tell the story of Israel’s subsequent history: the rise of Israel’s mighty empire under David, and its subsequent split into two separate kingdoms; the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians and then of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians; the exile of the Jews to Babylon; and then the return from exile and subsequent reestablishment of their land, Judah, under Persian rule.

Judah (Hebrew: yehudah) is the name of the southern part of the land of Israel. The same territory was called Judea by ancient Greeks and Romans, and this name is also sometimes used nowadays. Its inhabitants were called yehudim in Hebrew, and this became the English word “Jews.”
But historical narrative and laws are only two of the main categories of writing found in the Hebrew Bible. A third category consists of the pronouncements of various prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and others. Actually, prophetic speeches are themselves hardly of one sort; they include writings of different literary genres and styles. Sometimes prophets set out to reprove evildoers, and their words are full of biting sarcasm and social critique; at other times they seek to exhort the people to do what is right and warn of the dire consequences should they not. Sometimes the prophets report on their own visions or divine encounters. Words of comfort or coming judgment, reproaches aimed at Israel’s neighbors or Israel’s own officialdom, revelations of the future, glimpses of God’s very being—all these are to be found in the writings of Israel’s prophets.

In addition to these three main groupings is a fourth, fairly distinct group: the writings of Israel’s sages. The word “sage” is intended to designate not so much a wise individual as a member of a certain class within Israel and an adherent to a certain specific outlook or set of views. The compositions of these sages are generally termed “wisdom writings,” and they are to be found in the Hebrew Bible principally in three books, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, although traces of their influence have been detected elsewhere as well. The fifth and last main group of writings within the Bible consists of various prayers and songs of praise and thanksgiving, most notably those contained in the book of Psalms, but found elsewhere in the Bible as well. And beyond these five main groups are a number of other, minor categories—laments such as those found in the book of Lamentations, the love lyrics of the Song of Songs, the pastoral tale of Ruth, the court narrative of Esther, and yet others.

Within the Biblical Period

These writings had been transmitted from generation to generation, some of them doubtless orally for a time, but then eventually copied by hand onto parchment or papyrus. Even the most skeptical modern scholar would not deny that the oldest parts of the Bible go back, so the fact that we possess these texts today indicates that well within the biblical period itself, they must have played some role in the life of the people—otherwise, why should anyone have bothered to remember them and keep copying them?*

In fact, scholars can make an educated guess as to who was responsible for

* Parchment and papyrus disintegrate fairly quickly under normal climatic conditions. Thus, in order to have survived, all but the latest parts of the Bible would have had to be recopied numerous times within the biblical period. If such effort was expended, it certainly must not have been done in vain—the texts must have had some role in society, in people’s daily lives.
the preservation of these texts. Kings, no doubt, kept much of the historical material, not only for the sake of record keeping but, quite probably, for political reasons as well: the public reading of Israel's history might help maintain national unity and a sense of common identity, or rally people to this or that cause. Ordinary folk must likewise have taken pleasure in retelling by heart the tales of past heroes and significant events in history. Judges and other officials were certainly the guardians and preservers of laws. Priests had their own texts—instructions about performing this or that rite and other things of special concern to them. Some historical texts may also have been in the possession of priests, especially if the texts played a regular role in the celebration of Israel's religious festivals and other occasions at which priests officiated. The psalms were certainly recited as part of Israel's religious life, in temples and at other sacred sites; priests and other officials no doubt had charge of them too, though eventually the psalms may have moved to less formal settings, perhaps even to the homes of private individuals. The main concern of sages (some of whom were employees of the court) was mastering the wisdom of the past—they were thus most likely responsible for the survival of wisdom texts.

Not only did these texts survive in such different milieus, but they were no doubt also explained and commented upon there, supplemented now and again to bring them up to date or to make understandable a word or phrase or reference that had passed from common knowledge. In this sense, the Bible—or, rather, the books that were to become the Bible—had probably always been interpreted in some fashion. But there came a moment in history when interpretation of these texts suddenly became a great preoccupation in Israel, and a whole new kind of interpreter first emerged.

The Rise of the Ancient Interpreters

To understand why, at a certain point, the interpretation of these ancient texts became highly significant, it is necessary to mention a singularly important event in Israel's history: the Babylonian exile. In 586 BCE—long after the time of Israel's founders, Abraham and his descendants, and long after the time of some of the nation's greatest figures, Moses and Joshua and King David and King Solomon and all those who followed them—the city of Jerusalem fell into the hands of an invading army from Babylon. This was a cataclysmic event for the Jews: not only were they now a conquered people, but many of them, including the country's leadership, were forcibly relocated to Babylon (lest they regroup and rebel against the Babylonians). The exiles included, prominently, most of the country's political and intellectual leaders; for more than half a century they sat as virtual prisoners in a foreign land, powerless to return to Jerusalem.
When salvation came at last, it took the form of a new, upstart empire. The Persians, neighbors of Babylon, gathered their forces and, in surprisingly short order, overcame the Babylonian army. In so doing they took control not only of Babylon itself, but of its foreign holdings as well—including Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, in 538 BCE, the Persian emperor Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. Many did so, and Jewish life started up again in its old setting.

But the period of exile had had a lasting effect on the people. To begin with, as with any such upheaval, the Babylonian episode had reshuffled the political deck. The returning exiles were not of one mind as to what should happen next: Who was to rule Judah—some member of the former royal family, or the priests who had controlled the (now-destroyed) temple, or yet some other group? And should the returnees—as the Persians expected—settle meekly into being a minor province in the Persian Empire, under the control of a distant regime? Or should they wait for the opportunity to gain a measure of political autonomy, even independence?

What is interesting is the role that Israel’s ancient texts played in the debate over such questions. Perhaps it was the very fact of returning that brought people to evoke the past in trying to determine what to do in the future. After all, some of the Jewish exiles had decided that returning to Zion was not for them; they stayed in Babylon. Those who made the long journey back to Judah were thus a self-selected group, eager, in one sense or another, to go back to what had been before—not just to the land itself, but to everything that living on that land had come to represent in their minds. In other words, returning to their homeland was, by the very nature of things, an attempt to resurrect the past. But what exactly was that past—how had things been arranged before? You could not pick up an old boulder and ask it about life before the exile; you could not interrogate the trees. It was Israel’s own library of ancient texts that seemed to hold the answers to such questions—records of centuries of historical events as well as the weighty pronouncements of ancient prophets and sages. So different groups, even as they argued with one another as to the proper course to follow, used these ancient writings to bolster their positions.

We know this in particular from one biblical book that was composed at that time, the book of Chronicles. Essentially, Chronicles is a book about the glorious past—it retells in its own words many of the events recounted elsewhere in the Bible, especially in the books of Samuel and Kings. But in so doing, the author of Chronicles deliberately introduced changes in his sources, so that modern scholars have been able to find a whole political program hidden in his rewriting. This author was, for example, in favor of a future union with Judah’s neighbors to the north, and he dreamed of a time when the yoke of foreign rule might be thrown off. He was also a firm supporter of the Davidic monarchy and looked forward to the day of its
restoration to the throne. He also had his own ideas about theology and about the role of priests and others in the future state. Yet none of this was put forward as a political program as such; instead, he proposed what he proposed through a fictional retelling of things that happened long ago. The past, in other words, was to determine what would be in the future, and saying what had been was thus potentially an act of great political significance. 13

For this same reason, the interpreters of Scripture became increasingly important figures in Israel after the Babylonian exile. Since ancient texts were being looked to for guidance about the future, part of the interpreter’s job became specifically to trace a dotted line between past and present and say precisely what was to be concluded for us from this or that ancient text. It was not just Israel’s historical books that were scrutinized, but the entire library. Do the words of this ancient prophet or that ancient sage have any implications for our present situation?

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this change. From now on, the books in Israel’s sacred library would have a new role: these books may have been written long ago, but they were not just about things that happened in the past. Carefully analyzed, the words of these ancient texts might reveal a message about how people ought to arrange their affairs now and in the future.

The Ancient Interpreters at Work

Who were the interpreters of these ancient writings? 14 For the most part, their names are unknown. From their writings and from their whole approach to interpreting Scripture, it would appear that most of them were teachers or professional sages of sorts; 15 some were probably independently wealthy men (and, possibly, women) who had the leisure to pursue their subject. 16 Indeed, we know that a few, like the second-century BCE sage Ben Sira, belonged to the ruling class and were close to the political leadership (Sir. 39:4; 50:1–24); such figures no doubt strengthened the connection between reading Scripture and determining how community affairs were to be run in their own day. Their ideas about how Scripture is to be interpreted have survived in a number of texts belonging to the end of the biblical period—texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls 17 and the biblical apocrypha and pseudepigrapha 18—as well as in somewhat later writings such as those of early Christians and the founders of rabbinic Judaism.

1 A trove of ancient manuscripts first discovered in 1948 near the shores of the Dead Sea. The manuscripts, many of which go back to the third and second centuries BCE, include numerous texts that interpret the Bible or otherwise reflect then-current interpretations.

17 Books written toward the end of the biblical period but ultimately excluded from the Jewish biblical canon. They include such works as the book of Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the book of Jubilees.
The manner in which ancient interpreters read and explained Scripture is at first likely to strike modern readers as a bit strange. They did not go about the job of interpreting the way we do nowadays. Take, for example, the famous biblical story of how God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar:

And it came to pass, after these things, that God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” and he answered, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Then sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.” So Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey. He took two of his servants with him, along with his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering and then set out for the place that God had told him about. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Abraham told his servants, “You stay here with the donkey while the boy and I go up there, so that we can worship and then come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac; then he took the fire and the knife, and the two of them walked together. But Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father?” and he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked together.

When they came to the place that God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He then tied up his son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son. But an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not harm the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Gen. 22:1–13

The story itself is quite disturbing to modern readers—as it was to ancient readers. How could God, even as a test, order someone to kill his own son? And why would God ever need to test Abraham in this way? After all, God is supposed to know everything; presumably, He knew how the test would come out before it took place, and He certainly already knew that Abraham was one who “feared God,” as the angel says after the test is over. Equally disturbing is the way Abraham deceives his son Isaac. He does not tell him
what God has told him to do; Isaac is kept in the dark until the last minute. In fact, when Isaac asks the obvious question—I see all the accoutrements for the sacrifice, but where is the animal we’re going to sacrifice?—Abraham gives him an evasive answer: “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” This actually turns out to be true; God does provide a sacrificial animal—but Abraham had no way of knowing it at the time.

Modern readers generally take these things at face value and then either wrestle with their implications or else just shrug their shoulders: “Well, I guess that’s just the way things were back then.” But ancient interpreters instead set out to give the text the most favorable reading they could and, in some cases, to try to get it to say what they thought it really meant to say, or at least ought to say. They did this by combining an extremely meticulous examination of its words with an interpretive freedom that sometimes bordered on the wildly inventive.

Thus, in the case at hand, they noticed that the first sentence began, “And it came to pass, after these things.” Such phrases are often used in the Bible to mark a transition; they generally signal a break, “The previous story is over and now we are going on to something new.” But the word “things” in Hebrew also means “words.” So the transitional phrase here could equally well be understood as asserting that some words had been spoken, and that “it came to pass, after these words, that God tested Abraham.” What words? The Bible did not say, but if some words had indeed been spoken, then interpreters felt free to try to figure out what the words in question might have been.

At this point, some ancient interpreter—we have no idea who—thought of another part of the Bible quite unrelated to Abraham, the book of Job. That book begins by reporting that Satan once challenged God to test His servant Job. Since the story of Abraham and Isaac is also a divine test, interpreters theorized that the words mentioned in the opening sentence of our passage might have been, as in the book of Job, a challenge spoken by Satan to God: “Put Abraham to the test and see whether he is indeed obedient enough even to sacrifice his own son.” If one reads the opening sentence with this in mind, “And it came to pass, after these words, that God tested Abraham,” then the problem of why God should have tested Abraham disappears. Of course God knew that Abraham would pass the test—but if He nevertheless went on to test Abraham, it was because some words had been spoken by Satan challenging God to prove Abraham’s worthiness.

As for Abraham hiding his intentions from Isaac—well, again it all depends how you read the text. Ancient interpreters noticed that the passage contains a slight repetition:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac; then he took the fire and the knife, and the two of them walked together.
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But Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father?” and he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” *And the two of them walked together.*

Repetition is not necessarily a bad thing, but ancient interpreters generally felt that the Bible would not repeat itself without purpose. Between the two occurrences of “and the two of them walked together” is the brief exchange in which Abraham apparently hides his true intentions from Isaac. But Abraham’s words were, at least potentially, ambiguous. Since biblical Hebrew was originally written without punctuation marks or even capital letters marking the beginnings of sentences, Abraham’s answer to Isaac could actually be read as two sentences: “God Himself will provide. The lamb for the burnt offering is my son.” Read in this way, Abraham’s answer to Isaac was not an evasion but the brutal truth: you’re the sacrifice. If, following that, the text adds, “And the two of them walked together,” this would not be a needless repetition at all: Abraham told Isaac that he was to be the sacrifice and Isaac agreed; then the two of them “walked together” in the sense that they were now of one mind to carry out God’s fearsome command.

By interpreting the story in this fashion, ancient interpreters solved two of the major problems raised by this account, God’s apparent ignorance of how the test would turn out and Abraham’s apparent callousness and evasiveness vis-à-vis Isaac. But did these interpreters actually believe their own interpretations? Didn’t they know they were playing fast and loose with the text’s real meaning?

This is always a difficult question. I personally believe that, at least at first, ancient interpreters were sometimes quite well aware that they were distorting the straightforward meaning of the text. But with time, that awareness began to dim. Biblical interpretation soon became an institution in ancient Israel; one generation’s interpretations were passed on to the next generation, and eventually they acquired the authority that time and tradition always grant. *Midrash*, as this body of interpretation came to be called, simply became what the text had always been intended to communicate. Along with the interpretations themselves, the interpreters’ very modus operandi acquired its own authority: this was how the Bible was to be interpreted, period. Moreover, since the midrashic method of searching the text carefully for hidden implicat-

* Hebrew has no verb “to be” in the present tense; thus, this sentence would be the same whether or not the word “is” is supplied in translation.

§ “Interpretation” is probably the best one-word translation of this Hebrew word, but *midrash* had a particular connotation: it was non-obvious interpretation. Any fool could tell you that God had tested Abraham; it took a skilled interpreter to show what words in the text hinted at why He had wanted to, as well as at Isaac’s willing participation in the episode.
tions seemed to solve so many problems in the Bible that otherwise had no solution, this indicated that the interpreters were going about things correctly. As time went on, new interpretations were created on the model of older ones, until soon every chapter of the Bible came accompanied by a host of clever explanations that accounted for any perceived difficulty in its words.

**The Four Assumptions**

Readers always approach texts with certain assumptions, and the assumptions change depending on what they are reading; not every text is thought to mean in the same way. Thus, when we read a poem in which the poet says to his beloved, "I faint! I die!" we know he's not really dying; likewise, when he says he's wallowing in love in the same way that a cooked fish is wallowed in galantine sauce, well... we know this isn't really intended as an exact description of his emotional state. And it is not just poems. Novels and short stories, form letters and radio commercials and last wills and testaments—all sorts of different compositions come with their own conventions, and we as readers are aware of those conventions and interpret the texts accordingly. We expect to be amused by a stand-up comedian's recitation of his woes, and so we laugh in all the right places; yet if a somewhat similar monologue is spoken by a patient at his group therapy session, people will probably not laugh, in part because they bring an entirely different set of expectations to his "text." (Also, they don't want to hurt his feelings.)

It is a striking fact that all ancient interpreters seem to have shared very much the same set of expectations about the biblical text. No one ever sat down and formulated these assumptions for them—they were simply assumed, just like our present-day assumptions about how we are to understand texts uttered by poets and group-therapy patients. However, looking over the vast body of ancient interpretations of different parts of the Bible, we can gain a rather clear picture of what their authors were assuming about the biblical text—and what emerges is that, despite the geographic and cultural distance separating some of these interpreters from others, they all seem to have assumed the same four basic things about how the Bible was to be read:

1. They assumed that the Bible was a fundamentally cryptic text: that is, when it said A, often it might really mean B. Thus, when it said, "And it came to pass after these things," even though that might look like the familiar transitional phrase, what it might really mean was "after these words." Indeed, this text, they felt, was so cryptic that it did not even say what the words were—it had left it to the interpreters themselves to remember the book of Job and so figure out the rest. Similarly, when the Bible repeated "and the two of them walked together,"


the second occurrence of this phrase had a hidden meaning: Abraham and Isaac had agreed and now proceeded as if of one mind.

2. Interpreters also assumed that the Bible was a book of lessons directed to readers in their own day. It may seem to talk about the past, but it is not fundamentally history. It is instruction, telling us what to do: be obedient to God just as Abraham was and you will be rewarded, just as he was. Ancient interpreters assumed this not only about narratives like the Abraham story but about every part of the Bible. For example, Isaiah’s prophecies about the Assyrian crisis contained, interpreters believed, a message for people in their own time (five or six centuries later). Likewise, when the book of Nahum had referred metaphorically to a “raging lion,” the text was not talking about some enemy in Nahum’s own day, but about Demetrius III, who was the king of Syria six hundred years later, in the time of the ancient interpreters.” Similarly, the Bible’s laws were understood as being intended for people to obey in the interpreters’ own time, even though they had been promulgated in a very different society many centuries earlier.

3. Interpreters also assumed that the Bible contained no contradictions or mistakes. It is perfectly harmonious, despite its being an anthology; in fact, they also believed that everything that the Bible says ought to be in accord with the interpreters’ own religious beliefs and practices (since they believed these to have been ordained by God). Thus, if the Bible seemed to imply that God was not all-knowing or that Abraham had been callous and deceitful with his son, interpreters would not say that this story reflected beliefs about God or basic morality that had changed since ancient times. Instead, they stoutly insisted that there must be some way of understanding the Bible’s words so as to remove any such implications: that cannot be what the Bible really intended! And of course the Bible ought not to contradict itself or even seem to repeat itself needlessly, so that if it said “and the two of them walked together” twice, the second occurrence cannot be merely repetitive; it must mean something different from the first. In short, the Bible, they felt, is an utterly consistent, seamless, perfect book.

4. Lastly, they believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text, a book in which God speaks directly or through His prophets. There could be little doubt about those parts of the Bible that openly identify the speaker as God: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, say—

* I have mentioned this assumption last to avoid giving the impression that the other three are a natural by-product of the fourth. Actually, there is no reason to assume that a divinely given text ought to be cryptic, for example—on the contrary, would not God want His words to be easily understood by all? Moreover, while the first three assumptions are amply attested among the earliest of the ancient interpreters, that is not necessarily true of the fourth.
ing . . .” “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel . . .” But interpreters believed that this was also true of the story of Abraham and the other stories in Genesis, even though the text itself never actually said there that God was the author of these stories. And it was held to be true of the rest of the Bible too—even of the book of Psalms, although the psalms themselves are prayers and songs addressed to God and thus ought logically not to have come from God. Nevertheless, most interpreters held the psalms to be in some sense of divine origin, written under divine inspiration or guidance or even directly dictated to David, their traditional author.

How these assumptions came into existence is hard to say for sure, and in any case that question need not detain us here; the fact is, they did come into existence, even before Israel’s ancient library of sacred texts began to be called the Bible, in fact, even before its precise table of contents had been determined.

What are modern readers to make of these assumptions? Many readers will balk at the ancient interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story given above, indeed, at many of the interpretations mentioned in this book. But it is simply in the nature of assumptions in general that they are assumed, not consciously adopted. Once biblical interpretation had started along the path of these Four Assumptions, it developed a logic, and a momentum, of its own. This was simply how the Bible was to be understood. The power and persuasiveness of these assumptions may be clearer if one considers that, to a remarkable degree, they continue to color the way people read the Bible right down to the present day (even if nowadays they may lead to somewhat different conclusions from those advanced by the ancient interpreters). Thus, many modern-day Jews and Christians continue to look to the Bible as a guidebook for daily life (Assumption 2); they do not read it as if it were just a relic from the ancient past. In fact, a significant number of contemporary Jews and Christians seek to act on a daily basis in accordance with the Bible’s specific exhortations and laws, and many view the Bible’s prophecies as being fulfilled in the events of today’s world (another aspect of Assumption 2). Without quite saying so, quite a few readers also generally assume that the Bible has some sort of coherent message to communicate and that it does not contradict itself or contain mistakes (Assumption 3). Many also believe that the Bible’s meaning is not always obvious (Assumption 1)—it even seems deliberately cryptic sometimes, they say. And the idea of divine inspiration, in fact, the conception of the Bible as a whole as the word of God (Assumption 4), is an article of faith in a great many denominations.

Thus, whatever one thinks of the Four Assumptions, there is no denying their staying power. What is more, some of the interpretations they gave rise to have demonstrated a comparable durability: to a degree not generally recognized, these interpretations are still with us and have actually succeeded in
changing the meaning of quite a few biblical stories. As will be seen presently, the story of Adam and Eve only became “the Fall of Man” thanks to these ancient interpretive assumptions; the book of Genesis says nothing of the kind. The same is true of many other things that people have always believed the Bible says—that Abraham was the one who discovered that there is only one God, that David was a pious king who wrote the book of Psalms, or that the Song of Solomon speaks of God’s love for His people. The Bible says these things only if it is read in accordance with the Four Assumptions. That is why, even today, trampling on these assumptions can get people’s hackles up—Charles A. Briggs was neither the first nor the last modern scholar to learn that lesson.

Early Christian Interpreters

Jewish biblical interpretation has its own long and fascinating history. Starting from the Four Assumptions, it grew into the great body of rabbinic midrash in the early centuries of the common era, then developed further in the Middle Ages, branching off into philosophical, mystical, and other schools of interpreting Scripture. In another context it would be interesting to trace this evolution in some detail. But here our focus is on the rise of modern biblical scholarship. While Jews eventually came to play a role in that scholarship, it was at first mostly a Christian affair.

In its early stages, Christian biblical interpretation was not very different from Jewish interpretation. Since most of the first Christians were Jews, they not only read and studied the Bible in Hebrew but quite naturally adopted the interpretations and interpretive methods that Jews had been using for some time. About Abraham and Isaac, for example, Christians likewise maintained that God knew the outcome of the test before it began and that Isaac was well aware that he was to be the sacrificial victim. But gradually, Christianity acquired its own style of interpretation; building on elements in the Jewish approach to Scripture, its way of reading nonetheless became distinct.

One interpretive tactic that came to characterize Christian interpretation—reading the Bible allegorically—had originated with the Jews of Alexandria. Alexandria is a city on the Mediterranean coastline of Egypt, named after Alexander the Great, whose armies conquered Egypt (and the rest of the ancient Near East) in the late fourth century BCE. This is no insignificant detail: Alexandria became a magnificent Greek-style city, with Greek governmental institutions, Greek schools and theaters and gymnasium, and Greek as its official language. The Jews of Alexandria also came to be Hellenized; soon, they were thoroughly Greek in their education and outlook. Thus, when they read
the books of the Bible, it was in Greek translation; most likely, many of them knew not a word of Hebrew. In seeking to interpret the Bible, they also went about things in a thoroughly Greek way. They allegorized it.

Allegorizing is the technique by which concrete details in a text—people, events, places in which things occur—are explained as representing abstract entities, ideas, or virtues or vices or philosophical doctrines. The practice of allegorizing seems to stem from the central part that the poetry of Homer came to play in Greek education: for Greeks, Homer was the text and constituted the average person’s road to literacy and high culture. But as time went on, using the Iliad or the Odyssey as a primer for young minds came to be problematic: scenes of seduction or moral turpitude were especially troubling. Moreover, it bothered teachers that these central Greek writings did not contain any evidence of the things that later Greek civilization had come to believe essential—well-known teachings and philosophical doctrines and so forth. They therefore frequently resorted to “finding” such things in Homer even when they were not there, while at the same time eliminating parts that seemed objectionable by the same, allegorizing method: this concrete X or Y actually represents that abstract A or B.

Such an approach was of course tempting for Jews as well; their basic text, the Torah and other books of the Bible, presented a similar range of problems—not only biblical figures who seemed sometimes to act contrary to accepted norms, but laws that were no longer understood or seemed irrelevant in later times, as well as prophesies about nations that had long ago ceased to exist. Allegorizing offered a way of making such things seem relevant and up-to-date, indeed, true and noble and good.

This method of reading was followed—indeed, pursued at great length and with great panache—by the Jewish biblical commentator Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 BCE–ca. 55 CE). A number of examples of Philo’s allegorical way of reading the Bible will appear in the following chapters, but the essence of his approach can be summarized in just one example, the opening sentence of Philo’s commentary on the story of Abraham’s departure from his home town of Ur:

The departure from home as depicted by the literal text of Scripture was made by a certain wise man [Abraham]; but according to the rules of allegory, it is made by the soul of anyone fond of virtue who is searching for the true God.

Here, Philo admits that the biblical story in Genesis is literally talking about an event from the past, the time when “a certain wise man,” Abraham, left his home in Ur. But taken allegorically, the text is really not talking about Abraham at all, but about the human soul. Any soul in search of God, Philo goes on to say, must, like Abraham, leave its “home,” the world of trusting
only in the senses of sight, hearing, and so forth; such a soul must migrate to another "city," that is, to another way of perceiving. So, while the Bible literally means what it says about Abraham and other figures, it also has a deeper meaning, an "under-meaning" (hupomonē), as Philo sometimes calls it, and it is this allegorical sense that is truly significant nowadays.

This same allegorical way of reading was picked up by early Christians. For example, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215 CE), a careful reader of Philo, at one point comments on an agricultural law of the Bible that stipulates that the fruit of a newly planted tree is not to be eaten for the first three years (Lev. 19:23):

This image of husbandry may [also] be taken as a kind of instruction, teaching that we ought to eradicate [destructive] sins and the barren weeds of the mind, which spring up alongside the productive fruit, until the shoot of faith has matured and grown strong.

Stromateis 2.96.1

In other words, the newly planted fruit mentioned by the Bible really represents religious faith, which requires special nurturing in its first years, until it has become sufficiently strong for its owner to enjoy its fruits.20

Allegorical interpretations such as this one suited Christians not only because they helped make the Bible relevant (Christians eventually cared little about the Bible's agricultural laws, but a great deal about nurturing religious faith), but because allegorizing turned everything in the Bible that was particular and historical into something more general and immediately applicable. If you were a Greek-speaking convert to Christianity, even the name "Abraham" was foreign-sounding and hard to pronounce, and what this ancestor of the Jews did or did not do had no obvious connection to you and your life. But if Abraham represented any soul in search of God, then the passage was, in this sense, about you. On a more practical level, there also existed a great body of such allegorical interpretations that had been written in your own language, Greek, by an authoritative Jewish interpreter, Philo of Alexandria.21 For both reasons, Philo's works were studied carefully by early Christians and his allegorical methods were adopted in the early church.

Connecting to the New Testament

Christianity differed from Judaism, of course, principally in its belief in Jesus and the events described in the gospels of the New Testament. From the very beginning, Christians had argued that these events had in fact been predicted by the Bible itself, in the prophecies of Isaiah and the psalms of David. (This, it will be recognized, was an application of the second of the Four
Assumptions, that the Bible is not merely about the past but is directed to readers in their own day.) Indeed, early Christians saw great importance in the uncovering of any hidden references to the life of Jesus in Old Testament texts; for them, such references were nothing less than proof of the veracity of their faith.

But soon, this search for biblical predictions spread from overt prophecy to biblical narratives and songs and even laws. These too, Christians felt, sometimes seemed to refer to events of the New Testament. For example, the same story of Abraham and Isaac soon came to be read as a cryptic foreshadowing, a divine prediction of the crucifixion hidden in ancient Scripture. After all, if Jesus was the son of God, then God must have known that His beloved son would be killed and yet did not intervene to spare him, just as Abraham had accepted that his son be killed and did not withhold him. In fact, some early Christians viewed the crucifixion not merely as an act of killing, but as a sacrifice of the “Lamb of God” to expiate sin once and for all. If so, God’s order to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice thus seemed to suggest a closer parallel. Moreover, Isaac, as he proceeded to the designated place, carried the wood for the sacrifice (Gen. 22:6), just as Jesus was reported to have carried his own cross (John 19:17). Even the ram that Abraham eventually sacrificed in place of Isaac reminded interpreters of the crucifixion: Abraham had been able to sacrifice the ram because it was “caught in a [thorny] thicket by its horns” (Gen. 22:12), whereas Jesus had been mocked with a crown of thorns before he died. The early Christian interpreter Augustine of Hippo (354–430) summed up these connections. (He begins, however, by asserting—just as earlier Jewish interpreters had—that God had gone along with Abraham’s test only to demonstrate to others that he was faithful.)

Abraham was tested with the offering of his beloved son Isaac in order to prove his faithful obedience and so make it known to the world, not to God. . . . Comparing [Jesus to Isaac,] the apostle [Paul] says that [God] “did not withhold His own son . . .” [Rom. 8:32; the same word “withhold” is used by the angel in Gen. 22:12]. . . . For the same reason, Isaac himself carried to the place of the sacrifice the wood on which he was to be offered up, just as the Lord himself carried his own cross. Finally, since Isaac was not killed—for his father had been forewarned to kill him—who was that ram that was offered instead, by whose foreshadowing blood the sacrifice was accomplished? For when Abraham had caught sight of him, he was caught by the horns in a thicket. Who then did he represent but Jesus, who, before he was offered up, had been crowned with thorns?

City of God 16:32

This way of reading Old Testament texts is usually described as typological, since it sees the people and events of the Old Testament as foreshadowings,
or “types,” of people or events in the New Testament. Eventually, almost anyone or anything became a potential foreshadowing: Adam, Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and other figures from the Hebrew Bible were all thought in one way or another to represent Jesus, and numerous incidents besides the offering of Isaac were thought to prefigure the crucifixion. It was not just the New Testament per se that the Old Testament foreshadowed, but later Christian teachings and practices as well. For example, the idea of the Trinity (never actually presented as God’s very nature in the New Testament, but adopted as Christian doctrine later on) was found to be foreshadowed in the “three men” who appear to Abraham in Gen. 18:2, or in the threefold repetition of the word “holy” in Isa. 6:3.

The typological and allegorical ways of reading Scripture obviously differ in their orientation. One might describe allegorizing as “vertical,” moving up from the concrete to the abstract or from the physical to the spiritual, while the typological reading is “horizontal,” moving from earlier things to later ones. But both approaches see the details of the Bible as representative of something else, and both fundamentally embody the same Four Assumptions of earlier interpreters: the Bible is cryptic, relevant, perfect, and divinely granted. Also shared with earlier interpreters was the overall idea that this way of reading was superior to taking the text at face value. The allegorical and typological approaches soon gained great prestige. Together they came to be known as the “spiritual sense” of Scripture, as opposed to its mere “literal sense.”

The Letter and the Spirit

The first-century apostle Paul had unwittingly given an extra boost to the prestige of this spiritual sense. As one of Christianity’s earliest and most diligent exponents, he had visited and corresponded with different Christian communities along the eastern Mediterranean; his letters became an important part of the New Testament. In these letters, he sometimes highlighted what he saw as the basic difference between the two faiths, the Judaism in which he had been raised and the new faith of Christianity. These were, he said, based on two different ways of relating to God, two covenants: the former was a covenant based on keeping the laws of the Torah, the letter on divine grace. Here is how he put things succinctly in his second letter to the Corinthians: “God... has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6). By “letter” Paul meant the laws that were written down in the Torah (in his Greek, *gramma* could mean both an individual letter of the alphabet and a whole written document, even a book). While following that written text was essential in the religion in which Paul had been raised, the
new covenant of Christianity required only faith in God and His grace. 
Thus, this new covenant of Christianity was one "not of the letter but of the 
spirit."

But soon enough, Paul's words came to be misunderstood. They were 
taken to describe not two different ways of relating to God, two covenants, 
but two different ways of reading Scripture. Reading Scripture "according 
to the letter" meant taking it literally, in its plain sense. Since Paul had connected 
the "letter" with the old covenant of Judaism, Christians now began to 
associate Jews with reading literally. (In fact, however, the whole brief history 
we have been tracing says exactly the opposite. Midrash is anything but literal—it is often wildly imaginative.) Christianity, on the other hand, was 
understood as the religion of non-literalism—to find the spiritual sense, you 
had to look for some hidden allegorical or typological meaning, and preferring 
this spiritual meaning to the literal one now seemed to have Paul's official 
seal of approval. Such ideas were made explicit by the early Christian scholar Origen (ca. 185–254), who was a champion of allegorical interpreta-
tion; he passed on these ideas to later Christianity.

From the time of Origen on, this manifold spiritual sense was what commen-
tators and interpreters pursued. Origen himself was eventually judged to 
have gone too far—much of his biblical interpretation was condemned and 
banned; some works were destroyed in their original Greek version and 
have only survived thanks to their Latin translations. But the allegorical 
and typological approaches championed by Origen and many others were too 
deeply embedded in the fabric of Christianity to be challenged—Christian 
interpreters like Augustine guaranteed that the pursuit of the multilayered 
"spiritual meaning" would continue for centuries afterward. Even with the 
Protestant Reformation, when so many of the earlier ideas of the Catholic 
Church (including ideas about interpretation) were challenged by the Reform-
ers, the idea of the text's spiritual sense survived in the writings of the Reform-
ation's early leaders; it played an important part, for example, in shaping 
the thought of Martin Luther about Scripture.21

Soon enough, Christians set out to systematize the spiritual sense of Scriptu-
re and broaden its implications. The allegorical and typological ways of 
reading both sought our hidden meanings, but they were different from each 
other. And even allegory was not just one way of reading—there were differ-
ent possibilities for carrying out the abstract-for-concrete method: Abraham 
could represent the human soul, but he also could represent something on a 
different level of abstraction—a virtue, for example, or an approach to learn-
ing. Eventually, Christian thinkers sought to develop clearer definitions for 
the various spiritual senses of Scripture while at the same time exploring fur-
ther the idea that any individual verse might have simultaneous, different 
senses. Soon enough, there emerged the notion of fourfold interpretation: 
every verse of the Hebrew Bible might actually have four different meanings
simultaneously. These four senses were immortalized in a thirteenth-century
Latin ditty:

Littera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas,
Quo tendas anagogia.

(The literal sense teaches the facts [or “deeds”]; the allegorical, what you
should believe; the moral sense, what you should do; and the analogical,
where you are headed.)

The standard example of the application of this fourfold reading of Scrip-
ture is that of the city of Jerusalem as it might appear in a biblical verse.
According to the literal (or historical) sense, Jerusalem refers to an actual city,
a place where the Jews dwelt in biblical times. According to the allegorical
sense, however, Jerusalem refers to the church, so that when a biblical verse
talks about “dwell ing in Jerusalem,” it might really mean “abiding in the
Church.” * Reading Scripture in this allegorical way teaches especially about
the message of Christian doctrine; hence, it concerns what the Latin poem
refers to as “what you should believe.” The moral sense (sometimes also
called the tropological sense) focuses more on the life of the individual
soul—so that, in the moral reading, Jerusalem itself might be taken to repre-
sent a person’s soul and therefore teach “what you [as an individual] should
do.” The anagogical, or eschatological, sense teaches about what is to be in
the end-time—hence, Jerusalem here might represent the heavenly city of God
that will be revealed in the fullness of time.

Modern readers might, at this point, be rolling their eyes: every verse means
four different things? Not really. Even in medieval Europe, this fourfold
approach was only a sometimes thing: it was hard to find many verses for
which all four senses worked. But there were a few good examples. Psalm 114
begins, “When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people
of strange language...” One great champion of the fourfold reading, the Ita-
lann poet Dante Alighieri,** explained this verse’s meaning as follows:

Now if we look at the letter alone, what is signified to us is the departure of
the sons of Israel from Egypt during the time of Moses; if at the allegory,
what is signified to us is our redemption through Christ; if at the moral
sense, what is signified to us is the conversion of the soul from the sorrow
and misery of sin to the state of grace; if at the analogical, what is signified

* This is not quite allegory in the way Philo used the term, concrete-for-abstract, but
more in the way Paul used the term allegory in Gal. 4:24, where it is closer to typology, that
is, the earlier refers to the later, or the Old Testament refers to the New.
to us is the departure of the sanctified soul from enslavement to the corruption of this world into the freedom of eternal glory. And although these mystical senses are called by various names, they may all be called allegorical, since they are all different from the literal or historical.

Letter to Can Grande

Even if there were not many such verses, the very idea that Scripture had layers and layers of significance entered the popular imagination. In medieval Europe, the Bible became a vast, mysterious, and infinitely complicated world. The front and the back of this book were held together by hidden correspondences between Old and New; the most fundamental doctrines were nestled inside apparently innocent narratives, indeed, inside a single sentence made up of words that seemed to be talking about one thing but were authoritatively interpreted to be talking about something else entirely.

To enter the world of Scripture’s mysteries was thus a matter for trained professionals; only a priest or a monk schooled in the ways of fourfold interpretation, and especially in the interpretations of his predecessors, could say for sure what this or that verse meant. It would never occur to ordinary people to try their hand at interpretation—to begin with, they did not own their own Bibles, and they could not read. No, the Bible was something that ordinary people experienced in other ways. It was read aloud in public, preached about at church or in open markets; its stories were illustrated on stained glass windows and mosaic floors and the carved capitals of columns; it was recounted in poems, sung in hymns, and retold in passion plays—in these ways the Bible was everywhere, and no one escaped its influence. But its interpretation was not up for discussion; that had been decided a long time ago.

There was a word in medieval Latin for what drove this attitude toward Scripture: auctoritas. This is our word “authority,” but it had a special resonance in Latin. It was what the auctores—meaning both the “authors” and the “authorities”—had established long ago. Their wisdom—set down in the writings of the Church Fathers and later Christian teachers—could never be challenged, nor would anyone ever want to. (In fact, when, as sometimes happened, a later scholar had a new idea, he would usually seek to connect it to something that had been written by an earlier, authoritative figure—“This is what Augustine really meant when he said X or Y.”) Auctoritas was all-powerful and unquestioned: the Bible meant what the authorities had always said it meant.

The Beginnings of Change

Here we must fast-forward through a host of interesting developments in medieval times7 in order to arrive at the heady days of the Italian Renais-
sance and, more precisely, at the end of the fifteenth century. Even today, no one is quite sure why the Renaissance succeeded in overturning so many of the cherished ideas and sensibilities of the Middle Ages in such short order, but it did—including medieval biblical interpretation. Suddenly, auctoritas began to look very rickety indeed. People now started to have their doubts about the long-entrenched idea of the fourfold meaning of Scripture. Was the Old Testament really a web of foreshadowings of the New? Were its stories really to be understood as allegorical representations of the inner life of the soul? What if Abraham was just Abraham, an actual person who lived long, long ago and was written about in the Bible? Why should he represent or correspond to anything other than himself?

One contributory factor in the breakdown of auctoritas was the rapidly spreading knowledge of the Hebrew language among Christians. Until the late Renaissance, an astonishingly small number of Christian scholars had any notion of this tongue (although they could easily have learned it from the Jews in their towns). Starting at this time, however, Christians began to learn biblical Hebrew (as well as Greek), soon aided by the availability of little primers on the language’s grammar and vocabulary, written in Latin and printed on the recently invented printing press. Throughout the Middle Ages, the great authority on Hebrew in the Christian world had been the fourteenth-century scholar Jerome, translator of the Hebrew Bible into Latin. His writings about the Hebrew language in general as well as about specific words were repeated unquestioningly. Now, at first tentatively and later with greater assurance, Christian scholars began to question his authority, until some finally dared utter the words, “Jerome was wrong.” Soon, everything was up for grabs. Careful scholars ought, of course, to consult the writings of their predecessors, but people no longer assumed that the proper understanding of the Bible lay in the translations and commentaries of the past. Now they could read the Bible’s words for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

At this point, the scholarly reexamination of the Bible met up with another movement, the nascent Protestant Reformation. Well before the early 1500s, individual Christians had been expressing dissatisfaction with the ways of the church, and their dissatisfaction focused on a broad variety of issues. One of the things that bothered them was what they saw as corruption within its ranks—priests’ sale of indulgences to their parishioners, for example, or the role of money in obtaining high office within the church hierarchy (called “simony”). Along with these, some Christians objected to the church’s vast holdings of land and its evident concern for furthering its own wealth and political power (accompanied by a lack of concern for the poor); to many, the bishops and cardinals seemed more the servants of Mammon than of God.

In addition to these dissatisfactions, however, were others of a more theoretical and intellectual nature. The very idea of papal authority seemed illogical to some; how could a reasonable person accept a priori that the rulings
of the altogether human leader of the church would always be correct? And why should a human institution like the church, even if its existence was divinely authorized, play such a crucial role as intermediary between God and the individual Christian? Lastly—but probably not last in importance—what about the Bible? Should the church have the unchallenged authority to say what the Bible means, especially when that meaning seemed to be derived not from the Bible's own words as much as from old doctrines and questionable methods of interpretation?

These trends advanced together. John Wyclif (1328–89), sometimes called the "first Protestant," not only attacked the church but took it upon himself to translate the Bible from Latin to English so that it might be available even to those without an education, to hear and consider on their own. Wyclif's ideas influenced other would-be reformers, including Jan Hus in Bohemia (ca. 1369–1415), who was excommunicated in 1412 for his public proclamations; three years later he was executed. Despite such stern measures, discontent with the church, and the new climate of intellectual inquiry that helped to fuel it, were unstoppable. In the fifteenth century, numerous scholars—some, like Erasmus, still well known today, many others now forgotten—fed the move to reform with their researches into Scripture.

By Scripture Alone

In theory, the church was not the only potential authority in matters religious; there was also the Bible itself, the very word of God. It did not take the would-be Reformers long to understand that the Bible could become an important tool in opposing the power of the church. Wyclif, for example, had sought to promote the radical notion that the Bible should be the sole authority for church teaching, and his ideas influenced later figures. Sola scriptura, "by Scripture alone," eventually became a byword of the Protestant Reformation. It was certainly a happy coincidence, or perhaps no coincidence at all, that the promotion of Scripture to the role of sole arbiter in matters of faith was being urged precisely at the time when Christian scholars were learning Hebrew and Greek and seeking to interpret Scripture anew, without the benefit of church-sponsored interpretations and church-approved translations.

We will be the ones to decide what Scripture really means, the Reformers now said, basing ourselves on the biblical text and everything that is being discovered about it; then we will seek to put its words into action. So Martin Luther, leader of the German Reformation, put the case clearly when, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he was asked to recant his views:

Unless I be convinced by evidence of Scripture or by plain reason—for I do not accept the authority of the Pope or the councils alone, since it is
demonstrated that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am bound by the Scriptures I have cited, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. God help me. Amen.

Here the "evidence of Scripture" is not subject to the "authority of the Pope" but opposed to it, and Scripture will, according to Luther, necessarily win any such contest. Elsewhere he bristled at the very idea that the church might assign to one man, the Roman Pontiff, the right of interpreting Sacred Scripture by the sole virtue of his exalted office and power against all intelligence and erudition. But Scripture is to be interpreted only by the Spirit through which Scripture was written, because the Spirit is never to be found more present and lively than in the sacred writings themselves.13

The church has no inherent right to say what Scripture means; it is up to the Spirit (Luther means the Holy Spirit of the Trinity) to guide the human interpreter, along with "all intelligence and erudition"—that is, the newfound knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek and everything scholars were discovering about the real meaning of Scripture. And so, the old, church-sponsored fourfold approach to meaning was, for Luther and his followers, on its way out: "Our first concern will be for the grammatical [literal] meaning," Luther wrote in his psalms commentary in 1519, "since this is the truly theological meaning."14

In its new, stripped-down state, no longer accompanied by centuries-old traditions of interpretation, Scripture could now become the heart and soul of the Protestant movement. And it did. The Bible was, in the words of a group of early British Protestants who sought temporary refuge in Geneva,

the light to our paths, the key to the kingdom of heaven, our comfort in affliction, our shield and sword against Satan, the school of all wisdom, the glass [mirror] wherein we behold God's face, the testimony of his favour, and the only food and nourishment of our souls.15

But what exactly did Scripture mean? Was it always to be taken at face value, even when it commanded such things as capital punishment for someone who works on the sabbath (Exod. 31:14) or commits adultery (Lev. 20:10)? (Some reformers said yes.)16 What about when it seemed to conflict with modern science or common sense—saying, for example, that Joshua had caused the sun to stop in the sky, or that Elijah had ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire? Did taking the Bible literally leave no room for metaphor or figurative speech or exaggeration?
For a time, at least in some circles, it was anybody's guess. So long as the Catholic Church had been the sole authority, it was able to control how the Bible was interpreted; after the Protestant Reformation, anyone could be an interpreter. The English poet John Dryden described a world in which biblical interpretation had been turned over to the common man:

The book thus put in every vulgar hand,
Which each presum'd he best could understand,
The common rule was made the common prey,
And at the mercy of the rabble lay.
The tender page with horny fists was gall'd,
And he was gifted most that loudest baw'd:
The spirit gave the doctoral degree,
And every member of a company
Was of his trade and of the Bible free.
Plain truths enough for needful use they found,
But men would still be itching to expound:
Each was ambitious of th'obscurest place,
No measure ta'en from knowledge, all from grace.
Study and pains were now no more their care;
Texts were explained by fasting and by prayer:
This was the fruit the private spirit brought,
Occasion'd by great zeal and little thought."

Religio Laici 822-38 (1682)

Some control had to be placed on the interpretive fancies of enthusiasts, and Dryden clearly alludes to what he, and many others, believed that control ought to be: the "doctoral degree," conferred by a proper school of divinity and not by "the spirit" alone; "study and pains," and not merely "fasting and prayer." Proper interpretation, in other words, had to be based on solid knowledge.

A Fateful Alliance

Thus was formed the great alliance between Protestantism and biblical scholarship. In a sense, it had been there almost from the very start. Although the questioning of auctoritas in interpretation had begun quite independently of the Reformation, it soon became one of the Reformers' favorite causes and helped lead to the break with Rome. Then, once the new Protestant denominations had been established on their own, they provided the framework, and the sponsorship, for the ongoing scholarly inquiry into Scripture's true meaning. This alliance proved to be crucial. It is no accident that, to this day,
the great centers of modern biblical scholarship are to be found in largely Protestant countries—Germany and the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Great Britain, Canada and the United States.

Here again we must pass quickly through a host of important events and trends. While all this was happening in the relatively limited domain of biblical interpretation, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries watched the advance of scientific inquiry into the greatest questions of the natural order: Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) had argued that the earth rotated around the sun, and his ideas were soon taken up by others, notably Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). Once proven true, this idea sent shock waves through the whole of traditional belief. For centuries people had believed that the greatest source of knowledge about the world was divine revelation, specifically, the words of Holy Scripture. But Scripture contained not a hint about earth’s orbiting the sun, indeed, its account of creation seemed to say just the opposite (Genesis 1), as did the words of King Solomon, allegedly the wisest man in history (Eccles. 1:5). So research was now suggesting that modern science was capable of unlocking life’s secrets on its own, without the benefit of divine revelation—indeed, sometimes it even seemed to demonstrate that what was written in Scripture was false. In 1628 William Harvey announced his discovery of the workings of the circulatory system in the human body; this same period was marked by great advances in the study of anatomy, and surgery was becoming increasingly sophisticated. The newly perfected telescope gave scientists their first glimpse of the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus; soon, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) postulated his universal theory of gravitation. “Nature’s book”—opened by science—was turning out to be more reliable than that other book, the Bible. At the same time, thinkers such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650) were seeking to examine the very processes of human reasoning and, especially in the case of the latter, to proceed from a radical skepticism that took nothing for granted, including, prominently, the teachings of religion.

**Did Moses Write the Torah?**

With regard to the Bible, two important figures emerged in this period, the philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Benedict Spinoza (1632–77). Among other things, both expressed their views on one of the touchiest items of traditional religious belief, the claim that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch." This was a crucial item for both Jews and Christians (but probably even more for the former than the latter); if Moses, the greatest of the prophets, was not the Pentateuch’s real author, then why should anyone believe its stories or bother to obey its commandments? Yet even in medieval
times, a few Jewish scholars—including, prominently, Abraham ibn Ezra (ca. 1092–1167)—had pointed to a number of verses that seemed unlikely to have been written by Moses. For example, in describing Abraham’s travels in the Promised Land, the book of Genesis said:

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

Gen. 12:6

By saying that the Canaanites were in the land “at that time,” the text seems clearly to imply that when these words were being written, the Canaanites were no longer there. But if so, Moses was unlikely to be the author of this sentence—so long as he was alive, the Canaanites were indeed in the land.

Ibn Ezra pointed to other troubling instances. Why should the book of Deuteronomy, if it had been written by Moses, begin by saying that he had spoken to the Israelites “on the far side of the Jordan” (Deut. 1:1)? That expression implied that the person writing this was on the near side of the Jordan, which Moses never was, since he died before the entry into Canaan. And why should Gen. 22:14 contain the parenthetical observation, “as it is said today, ‘On the mountain of the LORD He [or it] will be seen’”? The sense is not altogether clear, but to Ibn Ezra this reference seemed to suggest a popular saying (“It is said today”) that could not have existed until long after Moses’ death, specifically, at a time after Solomon had built the Jerusalem temple on a mountain where “the LORD’s face will be seen” (Deut. 16:16).

Traditional interpretation had provided answers to these questions: as a prophet, Moses could have known that the Canaanites would be displaced (in fact, God had told him as much, Exod. 34:11); having likewise been told that the people of Israel would settle in Canaan, he wrote “on the far side of the Jordan” from their point of view, not his own, since he knew they were the ones who would be reading his words long after his death. (The same logic would explain “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.”) As for “On the mountain of the LORD He [or it] will be seen,” such a saying might have even existed since the time of Abraham and Isaac, so there was nothing unusual in Moses quoting it.

In raising these questions again, however, Ibn Ezra seemed to suggest that these traditional answers were inadequate. Instead, he and other medieval writers implied that these verses were little exceptions: most of the Pentateuch was indeed written by Moses, he felt, but a few verses had been added in later by other writers.41

With the rise of the new approach to biblical interpretation, Ibn Ezra’s questions were asked anew—indeed, Hobbes, Spinoza, and others added some new questions.42 How could Moses be the author of the Pentateuch if
one of its verses noted: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3)? Surely, interpreters reasoned, a very humble man would not have said such a thing about himself. How could another verse assert, "These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites" (Gen. 36:31)? This verse seems to assume the knowledge that kings eventually did rule over Israel—a circumstance that did not exist until centuries after Moses, in the time of Saul and David. Indeed, how could the Pentateuch at one point quote from a source called the Book of the Wars of the Lord with regard to a battle that took place in Moses' time (Num. 21:14)? Such a book must have been written after the battle, perhaps long after—so how could Moses be quoting it as if it were an old, established historical source?

In raising these questions, Hobbes and Spinoza did not adopt the same course as ibn Ezra and suggest that these verses were merely later additions. Instead, they said that they were sufficient to call into question the whole idea that Moses had written the Pentateuch. As Hobbes summarized his argument, "It is therefore sufficiently evident that the five books of Moses [that is, the Pentateuch] were written after his time, though how long after it be not so manifest." This was a shocking assertion.

While both these thinkers contributed significantly to the seventeenth century's wrestling with the Bible (and both dealt with far more than the authorship of the Pentateuch), it was Spinoza who ultimately had the greater influence on biblical scholars themselves. In a few pages of his remarkable little book the Tractatus Theologo-Politicus (1670), Spinoza outlined a new proposal for how the Bible was to be read, and this program became the marching orders of biblical scholars for the next three centuries. Among Spinoza's main points:

1. Scripture is to be understood by Scripture alone. The time-honored traditions about what the Bible means (Spinoza had in mind rabbinic midrash as well as Christian typological and allegorical interpretations) often lead to "absurdities"; therefore only Scripture's own words are to be considered. "All knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone."

2. In order to understand Scripture, we must understand all the peculiarities of its language and its world of ideas, and not impose on it our own, later conceptions. There is no reason to assume that what Scripture says conforms to our own values or our current knowledge—or even to logical thought. We should thus "take every precaution against the undue influence not only of our own prejudices, but of our faculty of reason."

3. We should thus begin by assuming that Scripture means what Scripture says even when it disagrees with our own conceptions. For exam-
ple, when Moses is said to have described God as a "[consuming] fire" (Deut. 4:24) or as a "jealous God" (Exod. 20:5), we have to take such things literally unless they can be shown to contradict some other saying of Moses, in which case they may be interpreted metaphorically. 4 In the first instance, the fact that Moses elsewhere is said to have asserted that God has no form or likeness (Spinoza’s understanding of Exod. 20:4) proves that he could only have meant "fire" as a metaphorical description. The same cannot be said of "jealous God," however: since Moses nowhere denies that God has emotions, there is no reason to believe that he did not impute emotions to Him.

4. Someone who wishes to inquire into Scripture’s meaning must likewise investigate how the books themselves were put together and the process of their transmission. The life of the reputed author must be studied, his personality traits as well as his historical context, in order to understand how he intended what he said to be understood—whether, for example, he intended something as an actual law or merely as moral instruction, and whether something was being put forward as eternally valid or merely as a short-term measure, "things of only temporary significance or directed only to the benefit of a few."

5. Finally, in considering the words of prophets, one must recognize that they frequently contradict one another. Even on such essentials as "what God is [and] in what way He acts and provides for all things," Spinoza wrote, "we have clearly shown that the prophets themselves were not in agreement." One must therefore concentrate on those few items on which all prophets do agree, "such as, for example, that there is one unique and omnipotent God and He alone is to be worshiped. . . ."

It is not difficult to see that the program outlined by Spinoza calls for the systematic dismantling of the Four Assumptions mentioned earlier. Scripture is cryptic and allusive? Not at all; Scripture should always be assumed to mean (unless clearly proven otherwise) exactly and literally what it says. Scripture has a lesson for us today? On the contrary, Scripture can be understood only in the context of its own time, and presumably some portion, perhaps most, of what it says was never intended as “eternally valid” but only applied to people living then (or even just some people living then, “a few”). Scripture

* Here Spinoza is assuming, for the sake of argument, that Moses is indeed the author of the entire Pentateuch.

§ An important point for Spinoza, since Maimonides and later Jewish thinkers specifically denied that the Torah attributes emotions to God, and that any mention of God being angry or pleased or the like is simply intended to make things comprehensible in human terms.
is perfectly harmonious and without error? Hardly. Prophets contradict one
another and seem to agree only on a few essentials; moreover, some of the
things the Bible says contradict our current understanding, including modern
science. (In fact, Spinoza noted, some parts of Scripture were added in by
later hands and cannot even be attributed to the prophets themselves.) All
of Scripture is divinely given or divinely inspired? Here, Spinoza is careful,
but a close reading of his words will reveal his profound skepticism about the
divine nature of prophecy. The prophets mostly saw images in their minds
(Isa. 6:1–7; Num. 12:6). Spinoza says elsewhere; their job consisted of
translating these images into words, for which they relied on their imagina-
tive faculty. Such a procedure is inherently unstable, Spinoza felt; their words
can hardly be considered more reliable than the conclusions of solid science—
the contradictions within Scripture demonstrate that. On the contrary,
prophets were not endowed with a more perfect mind [than other thinkers],
but with a more vivid power of imagination." The best one can say of the
prophets, Spinoza ultimately claimed, is that they were concerned with what is
"right and good," they saw things or heard things and then their imagina-
tion turned these into words from God.

Spinoza was a controversial figure in his own day, blackballed by the Am-
sterdam Jewish community in which he had grown up and viewed with
great suspicion by Christian divines. When his book was finally published, it
was denounced as "harmful and vile," "most pernicious," "intolerably unre-
strained," "subversive," "blasphemous," "diabolical," and "adulterous." Yet
people, especially biblical scholars, kept reading it and thinking about it.

A Century of Lights

If Spinoza was ahead of his time, it was not by much; the eighteenth century
introduced a host of new thinkers who set out to investigate the Bible in pre-
cisely the manner that he had advocated. This was the time known to Ger-
mans as the Aufklärung and to the English as the Enlightenment; in French it
was the siècle des lumières, the "century of lights." By whatever name, it was a
period of rationalism’s triumph, a time of untrammelled scientific inquiry
and a questioning of all received traditions. Catholicism and the various
Protestant denominations continued their paths, but alongside them sprang up
a new faith altogether characteristic of the age: Deism. Deists defined them-

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This text is from the book "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship."
Deism was very popular among intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic; among its American exponents were Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Few American schoolchildren who learn the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence are told that its reference to "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God" is a passing reflection of Jefferson's deeply held Deism (and his profound skepticism about the God revealed in Scripture). In this new climate, the Bible was not always revered; indeed, some writers actually vilified it. The philosopher David Hume (1711–76), for example, asserted that the Pentateuch is

a book presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people [= the Jews], written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates, corroborated by no concurring testimony, and resembling those fabulous accounts which every nation gives of its origin. Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people as the favourites of heaven: and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable: I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after a serious consideration declare, whether he thinks the falsehood of such a book, supported by such testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates; which is, however, necessary to make it be received.9

These sentiments were echoed by Voltaire—certainly no specialist on the Bible, but someone who knew well the arguments of those who were.9 In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), Voltaire wrote that the Pentateuch

must appear to every polished people as singular as the [Jews'] conduct; if it were not divine, it would seem to be the law of savages beginning to assemble themselves into a nation; and being divine, one cannot understand how it is that it has not existed from all ages, for them and for all men.

About Moses, the Pentateuch's author, he wrote in the same work:

Several learned men have finally doubted if there ever was a Moses, and whether this man was not an imaginary being, such as were Perseus, Bacchus, Atlas [et al.], and so many other heroes of romance whose lives and prowesses have been recorded. It is not very likely, say the incredulous, that a man ever existed whose life was a continual wonder. It is not very likely that he worked so many stupendous miracles in Egypt, Arabia, and Syria,
without their being known throughout the world. It is not likely, that no Egyptian or Greek writer should have transmitted these miracles to posterity. . . . According to these unbelievers, the books attributed to Moses were only written among the Babylonians during the captivity, or immediately afterward by Ezra.

Such ideas were considered radical in the eighteenth century; mainstream Christians continued to believe in the Bible’s sanctity and in the truth of its words. There certainly was a Moses, they said, and he certainly did write the Pentateuch. But the acid pen of Hume and Voltaire and others challenged believing Christians to provide proof, or at least counterarguments, in the new spirit of rational inquiry."

This put such believers in a difficult bind; in a sense, the minute one began to read Scripture with the same assumptions that one brought to the reading of humanly authored books, the argument was lost. How could one claim that such a book was holy or utterly unique? Nevertheless, many sincere Christians in the eighteenth century found themselves investigating Scripture’s human side. One such man was Robert Lowth (1710–87). The son of a prominent theologian, Lowth served as professor of poetry at Oxford University for a time but resigned his post in 1752 and pursued service in the Anglican Church; he was ultimately named bishop of London and dean of the Chapel Royal. While still at Oxford, Lowth wrote an influential study of biblical poetry, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (published in 1753). The book is full of insights into the rules by which the Bible’s songs and prayers were composed, but it raised a vexing question: did not his search for meter, rhyme, and other poetic features imply that the Bible’s poems had been written in very much the same way as ordinary, human poems are composed? Lowth tried to justify his effort to his students in his opening lecture:

*It would not be easy, indeed, to assign a reason why the writings of Homer, of Pindar, and of Horace should engross our attention and monopolise our praise, while those of Moses, of David, and Isaiah pass totally unregarded. Shall we suppose that the subject is not adapted to a seminary in which sacred literature has ever maintained a precedence? Shall we say that it is foreign to this assembly of promising youth, of whom the greater part have consecrated the best portion of their time and labour to the same department of learning? Or must we conclude that the writings of those men who have accomplished only as much as human genius and ability could accomplish should be reduced to method and theory; but that those which boast a much higher origin, and are justly attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, may be considered as indeed illustrious by their native force and beauty, but not as conformable to the principles of science nor to be circumscribed by any rules of art?*
In other words, just because the Bible's words were inspired by the Holy Spirit does not mean they ought not to be analyzed in the same way as the writings of classical Greece or Rome. And if a committed Christian should succeed in discovering, as Lowth felt he had, the "principles of science" and "rules of art" that determined how biblical poetry had been composed, should he not go ahead and make these known to the world? Thus, although traditionalists and radicals disagreed sharply on what the Bible was and how it was to be read, they really were not far apart on matters of approach and method; even in the most orthodox circles, the words themselves (which were still called the "literal" or "grammatical" or "historical" sense of Scripture) were now primary, the starting point of any further discussion.  

*Filling in the Blanks*  

But what exactly were those words? One interesting feature of the traditional Hebrew text has not been mentioned so far. Biblical Hebrew—like Arabic, Aramaic, and some other Semitic languages—often leaves the vowels inside words unexpressed. Such a system of writing wouldn't work at all in English. What would the following sentence mean?

I FND A BRD

Probably most people would guess that FND stands for "found" or "find." But it might also stand for "fined," "fanned," "foned" (that is, "phoned"), perhaps even "fond" or "fiend." As for BRD, that could represent "bird," "bread," "brad," "broad," "board," "bard," "bride," "buried," "beard," "braid," "by-road," and yet more. Thus, the little sentence above could be construed as saying, "I found a bird," "I find a bride," "I fined a bard," "I phoned abroad," "I fanned a beard," and all sorts of other combinations. Hebrew is less ambiguous than English: there are relatively few homonyms, and words are mostly built out of basic roots in predictable patterns. Still, this system of writing left plenty of room for ambiguity. (The consonants SPR, for example, will usually have some connection with the Hebrew root for "count" or "recount," but in various biblical verses these three letters can designate such diverse nouns as the words for "enumeration," "document," or "scribe," as well as different verbal forms meaning "he counted," "to count," "count!" "he told," "to tell," "tell!" and so forth. It all depends on what vowels one thinks ought to go between the three consonants.)

What is more, as we have already seen in the case of Abraham and Isaac, the biblical text came without capital letters or commas or periods. That is what allowed interpreters to turn Abraham's vague words of assurance, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son," into the stark
assertion, “God Himself will provide. The lamb for the burnt offering [is] my son.”

Taken together, these two sources of ambiguity left plenty of room for different interpretations. Aware of this difficulty, Jewish scholars had developed a system of dots and other signs to represent the vowels of each Hebrew word as well as the basic punctuation of each sentence. Traditionalists maintained that this system was very old—some claimed it went back to Moses himself—but others, relying on the testimony of Renaissance Jewish scholarship, asserted that it went back only to the Middle Ages and therefore had no authority.⁶¹ For each people, every word of the Hebrew Bible was now potentially suspect: perhaps the medieval vowel signs were wrong; perhaps the medieval punctuation was wrong; indeed, perhaps some scribe back in biblical times had made a mistake and had written the wrong letter. Given what they saw as the inherent unreliability of the traditional text, biblical scholars now proposed emendations freely; some even set out to create a whole new system for determining the text’s vowels.⁶²

"The German Science"

In short, by the end of the eighteenth century, every aspect of the Bible was found to be fair game for the probing, often skeptical, questions of scholars, and one by one the cherished interpretations of earlier Christians were being dismissed. Not only did most Protestant scholars now reject most of the typological foreshadowing of the New Testament in the Old (that is, the stories of Isaac, Joshua, and other figures were no longer accepted as containing hints about the life of Jesus), but even the application of actual prophecies to New Testament times came to be suspect. For example, the prophet Isaiah’s prediction that “a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isa. 7:14) could not, many maintained, possibly refer to Jesus: to begin with, they said, the word translated “virgin” really only means “young woman” in Hebrew, and in any case this was a prediction about the birth of a baby in the time of Isaiah himself, not of a baby to be born more than seven hundred years later.⁶³ Thus, if Isaiah’s words had been cited in the gospel of Matthew in connection with Jesus’ birth (1:23), this was “a simple, historical observation or an allusion.”⁶⁴

More generally, a rift now gradually developed between what the words of the Bible said and the historical events it purported to describe. In an earlier day, the Bible was primarily a book. People of course believed that the things it described were true, but, as we have glimpsed, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, it was the text that was primary, since it contained all the secret meanings and doctrines and interrelationships that were the heart of the Bible’s message. This did not change immediately with the Renaissance, but starting then, what earlier Christians had called the literal or “historical"
sense of Scripture took on a new importance. Whatever else it was doing, the Bible was also talking about things that had happened in this world, and these events themselves took on a reality of their own. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this subtle shift, which became (and remains) a mainstay of the Protestant way of reading Scripture. Gradually, the words of the text ceased to be primary, each verse the gateway to a host of hidden meanings. Instead, the text became important principally as an account of real events: it was the gateway to the actual things that had happened in the ancient past. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the Bible's account of these things became increasingly suspect. Did the Red Sea really split in two? Was the Resurrection an actual event? The task, at least as some scholars saw it, was to come up with a plausible account of what might really have taken place. The events had become the real Bible for them, and the words of Scripture were increasingly seen as something other than a factual recitation—often something in need of apologetic explanation.

Of course, scholarship is one thing and the real world another. Such thoughts may have appeared in learned tomes, but they were rarely repeated from the pulpit. Even today, ministers trained in liberal seminaries are taught all kinds of things about the Bible that their parishioners never hear about: there has always been an understandable tendency to soft-pedal the difficulties raised by scholarship and to accentuate the positive (without saying anything known to be untrue, of course). Thus, although scholars were pushing ahead with their own research, ordinary churchgoers did not necessarily confront its results on Sunday.

While biblical scholarship continued to be pursued in various countries, it now became the particular specialty of Germany. German Protestant scholars investigated all manner of subjects connected with the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New; but they were particularly attracted to that same question that had puzzled biblical scholars during the Enlightenment, the authorship of the Pentateuch. If, as many now claimed, Moses was not its true author, who was?

The key to cracking this mystery, scholars came to feel, lay in the different words used by the Hebrew Bible to refer to God. Some parts of the Pentateuch used the "generic" Hebrew word for God, *'elohim*. Other parts used the Tetragrammaton, that is, the ineffable "proper name" of God, consisting of the four Hebrew letters corresponding to our *Y, H, W*, and *H*. Why use...
two different names? In the same year that Lowth published his study of biblical poetry (1753), a French Protestant scholar, Jean Astruc, had suggested that Moses had combined two different sources in composing the Pentateuch, each of which used a different word for God. That would also explain why some of the stories that used one of these names sometimes overlapped with stories that used the other name—why, for example, there are two stories relating how Abraham made a covenant with God (Genesis 15 and 17), or two stories that explain how the city of Beer Sheba got its name (Gen. 21:22–31 and 26:28–33). In these cases, each of the paired stories uses one name for God while the other uses the other name.

In nineteenth-century Germany, many scholars accepted the idea that the Pentateuch had been written through a combination of different written sources. But that hardly answered all the questions. Was Moses the one who combined them (as Astruc had maintained), or was it some later figure? And were there just two sources? Scholars noticed that overlapping stories sometimes used the same name for God: for example, there are two accounts of how Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (Gen. 32:24–30 and 35:9–10), but both refer to God by the generic name 'elohim. Perhaps there had thus been two different sources that used the name 'elohim."

At this point, a German doctoral student, W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849), began working on the book of Deuteronomy, and he soon became convinced that the writer of Deuteronomy was different from all the other sources of the Pentateuch: his style was different, his laws differed in many particulars from earlier laws, and, most strikingly, de Wette argued, he had a completely different notion of the role played by the temple, particularly in connection with the sacrificing of animals. Not only did de Wette think that Deuteronomy came from a different hand, but he had a definite idea about when it was written. Its composition, he argued (on the basis of a certain passage in 2 Kings 22), went back to the days of King Josiah, that is, to the end of the seventh century BCE. De Wette claimed that there was no evidence that anyone before Josiah had known of the laws contained in Deuteronomy—ever. If, for example, the prophet Samuel had known of the book of Deuteronomy, de Wette asked, why should he ever have expressed misgivings about the idea of anointing a king (1 Sam. 8:6–8), when Deuteronomy clearly called on people to do so (Deut. 17:14–20)? To this de Wette added many other examples.

For the German scholars, de Wette’s work proved highly suggestive, since it gave them a fixed point in time from which to try to date the other sources

vowel dots that had been written in later by Jewish scholars. Eventually, however, it became clear that those vowel dots actually belonged to the Hebrew word for “My Lord” (‘adonay) and had been written in to remind readers to substitute the word “My Lord” for this ineffable name.
they had identified. If the author of Deuteronomy lived, according to de Wette's theory, sometime in the seventh century (when Josiah was king), then before him must have been at least three other writers. The one who always used the Tetragrammaton, that is, the name for God spelled with the four Hebrew letters Y-H-W-H, the German scholars designated "J" (since the sound for Y is spelled in German with a J). The one who preferred 'elohim they designated as "E." Both of these, they felt, had preceded the author of Deuteronomy ("D"), but in addition to them there must have been another source, a priestly writer ultimately designated "P." Some scholars believed that P was the earliest writer of all, responsible for what they called the "basic text," the laws of priestly sacrifices and other ritual matters; to this "basic text" had been added J, E, and eventually D. It was a peculiarity of P that he avoided using the Tetragrammaton for any stories set before the time of Moses, since P maintained that this sacred name was first revealed to Moses and had been unknown in earlier times (Exod. 6:2-3). For those earlier stories, therefore, P consistently used the word 'elohim. This would explain, the German scholars said, why there are duplicate stories in Genesis that both use this name: one would have been written by P and the other by E.

The Education of Charles Augustus Briggs

To learn more about such theories, Charles A. Briggs, who had begun his studies at Union Theological Seminary with some of the leading American scholars of the day, sailed to Germany in the summer of 1866, accompanied by his young wife, Julie. The place he had selected for further study was the University of Berlin, the same institution at which his teacher and close advisor at Union, Henry Boynton Smith, had pursued his doctoral studies.

At almost precisely the same moment, a young German divinity student, Julius Wellhausen, was beginning his studies at the University of Göttingen with one of the leading biblical scholars of the day, Heinrich Ewald (1802-75). Wellhausen and Briggs were thus close contemporaries (Briggs was three years older), and they were destined to play somewhat similar roles in their native lands. Both were eloquent spokesmen for the new, "historical" approach to understanding the Bible and its process of creation, and both succeeded in large measure in convincing their fellow scholars of the correctness of this approach (although neither managed to bring many of their conservative coreligionists to accept the new ideas). Both were also hailed as great scholars in their own right—indeed, in this respect, Julius Wellhausen was even more successful than Charles A. Briggs. Wellhausen is largely considered one of the founders—the founder, some would say—of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Wellhausen's reputation rests largely on his wide-ranging study Prole-
Among the topics covered in this work was the puzzle of the Pentateuch. Building on the work of predecessors (notably K. H. Graf), Wellhausen put forward a fourfold Documentary Hypothesis to explain the authorship of the Pentateuch. According to this scheme, the Pentateuch had been composed in sequence. The priestly source (P), previously thought by some scholars to be the earliest source, was actually the latest, he said; before it came D, still earlier E, and before all of these, J. (The J source belonged, however, centuries after the time of the real Moses.) Wellhausen’s claim was not only that these different sources existed, but that they in turn bore witness to the gradual evolution of Israel’s religion.

At the time when the J texts were written, Wellhausen believed, Israel was still a naive and unsophisticated people, not very different from its Canaanite neighbors. J thus demonstrates a rather “primitive,” corporeal conception of God, and J’s world is an altogether polytheistic (or even animistic) one. The E source, though also early, “breathes the air of the prophets” and bears witness to the first signs of a more advanced theology in Israel. Nevertheless, the religion of both J and E is closely tied to the natural world and the agricultural cycle: to hear J and E tell it, the sole purpose of Israel’s major festivals was to celebrate God’s bounty at harvest time. Theirs is also an easygoing, spontaneous, and unencumbered faith; for example, there is as yet no fixed, hereditary priesthood. By the time D comes along, all this has changed. D’s presentation of God is far more abstract, and his attention is turned from the natural world to that of law and history; the annual festivals have begun to be explained as celebrating events from Israel’s past, and keeping God’s more and more elaborate laws (including those of an established priesthood) becomes a central religious concern. Finally, in P, Israel’s religion has become a thing of priestly ceremonies utterly divorced from the natural world and even from the common people, and the process of historicizing attested in D is far more pronounced.

Wellhausen’s scheme, apart from the detailed support its author marshaled from every part of the Bible, appealed to his readers because the very idea of development—that more complex things evolve out of simpler forms—was much in vogue in Europe at the time. Today, we tend to take this idea for granted, but it had become a moving force and model for understanding history only in the nineteenth century. It was particularly characteristic of the Romantic movement in literature and put its stamp on European thought, particularly through the writings of the philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Israel’s religious conceptions, in Wellhausen’s view, could be shown to fit quite well with Hegel’s ideas of historical development.

But is any of this true? Today, more than a century after Wellhausen wrote, many people of traditional religious faith—Christians and Jews—reject his claims and continue to maintain that Moses was the sole author of the Pentateuch. Any appearance of different documents or historical develop-
ment is an illusion, they say. Indeed, a glance at the history recited above, they would point out, will show just how speculative the whole thing is: the theories keep changing—P is early, P is late; there are three sources; no, four; no, five; no, more! Thus, on the Internet today are numerous sites devoted to arguing against the Documentary Hypothesis: Wellhausen's theories are just that, they say, theories for which no absolute, scientific proof can ever exist. Indeed, a number of trained university scholars have endorsed some version of this position over the past century. But today, it must be conceded, the majority of biblical scholars in American and European universities are convinced by the idea of the Pentateuch's multiple authorship. Even if no absolute proof exists, they say, some theory of different authors is the most logical and parsimonious way to make sense of the evidence. As will be seen on the following pages, some elements of Wellhausen's approach have been modified over time, and of late a serious challenge has been mounted to its chronological ordering of things, but the basic idea of the Documentary Hypothesis has nonetheless survived the sustained scrutiny of scholars over the last century.

The Documentary Hypothesis is only one issue among many in which current university scholarship is pitted against traditional religious belief. But at the end of the nineteenth century, it was a particularly emotional and symbolic one. Books and museums and Bibles themselves were full of pictures of the old, bearded Moses bringing God's sacred laws to the people of Israel. Could it be that this was all fiction, that in place of Moses stood four or more faceless figures who wrote at different times in Israel's history and whose overall ideas—about God as well as about the particulars of Israel's religion—were quite at odds with one another?

The Briggs Heresy

In Berlin, Briggs studied the ideas of Wellhausen's immediate predecessors and teachers, and they had an electric effect on the young evangelist's faith. He did not reject them—the contrary, they came to Briggs (who had long been studying the Bible in Hebrew and knew it well) with the force of divine revelation. Describing his first six months of study at Berlin, Briggs wrote to his uncle Marvin in January of 1867:

> When a new light dawns from above, most men cling to the old and can't believe any new light possible. But the world needs new views of the truth. The old doctrines are good but insufficient. . . . Let us seek more light under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I cannot doubt but that I have been blessed with a new divine light. I feel a different man from what I was a few months ago. The Bible is lit up with a new light.
Briggs followed that "new light" with the enthusiasm of a proselyte. Back in the United States, he soon began his professional life of teaching and writing and made it his personal mission to promote the new biblical scholarship to his colleagues and students, all the while contributing mightily to it in his own research. What he was out to discover was nothing less than the truth, "what really happened," as German scholars like to put it. Surely there could be nothing bad about the truth. It might jostle some long-held notions, Briggs felt, but in the end it had to be beneficial; indeed, it would reveal the unadulterated, pristine basis of Christian faith.

He did not pursue this mission unopposed: from the beginning, many of his coreligionists resisted the new ideas of German scholars and their American exponents. But when it came to these opponents—particularly old-guard ministers who were in the habit of using the Bible to support their own, dogmatic views—Briggs did not pull any punches:

The real reason these men are battling us is because their kind of Bible is being attacked. Destroy their kind of Bible and you destroy them. The Dogmaticians must therefore do battle with Higher Criticism [that is, the efforts of Wellhausen and others to discover how Scripture came to be] because Higher Criticism is taking away their very bread and butter. For it is destroying their prooftexts, which is the very stuff of their sermons."

Such combativeness, along with the substance of Briggs's ideas, are what ultimately got him in trouble with his denomination. In his famous inaugural address, Briggs denounced the "dead wood, dry and brittle stubble, and noxious weeds" of current teaching. The old ways of thinking needed to go, not just with regard to biblical interpretation, but with fundamental matters of church teachings and its day-to-day policies. "Criticism is at work with knife and fire," he said that night. "Let us cut down everything that is dead and harmful, every kind of dead orthodoxy.""62

In spite of his critics, Briggs forged ahead with his mission. Today, he is considered a hero of—and something of a martyr to—the cause of modern biblical scholarship. His trial did not turn out as he had hoped. When the votes were counted the next day in Washington, D.C., a hefty majority of the delegates were found to have voted against him. A formal statement was prepared following the vote, declaring that

this General Assembly finds that Charles A. Briggs has uttered, taught and propagated views, doctrines and teachings as set forth in the said charges contrary to the essential doctrine of Holy Scripture and the Standards, and in violation of his ordination vow... Wherefore this General Assembly does hereby suspend Charles A. Briggs, the said appellant, from the office of minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.
To be sure, unlike convicted heretics in an earlier age, Briggs was not burned at the stake. In fact, he was even able to stay on at Union Theological Seminary, which voted to sever its connection with the Presbyterian Church in order to keep Briggs in his new chair. (After a while, he also received a new ordination, this time as a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church.) But he was certainly jarred, and scarred, by the trial.

Despite his tribulations, Briggs continued his mission to slash away the "dead wood" (a goal he pursued in connection with another of his longstanding causes, doctrinal reform and Christian unity). Indeed, in a particularly stirring passage from one of his later books, Briggs switched metaphors, comparing the modern scholar's work not to pruning and clearing an overgrown field but to the clearing done by a modern archaeologist digging down into an ancient site:

Ancient Jerusalem lies buried beneath the rubbish of more than eighteen centuries. It is covered over by the blood-stained dust of myriads of warriors, who have battled heroically under its walls and in its towers and streets. Its valleys are filled with the debris of palaces, churches, and temples. But the Holy Place of three great religions is still there, and thither countless multitudes turn in holy reverence and pious pilgrimage. In recent times this rubbish has in a measure been explored; and by digging to the rock-bed and the ancient foundations bearing the marks of the Phoenician workmen, the ancient city of the holy times has been recovered, and may now be constructed in our minds by the artist and the historian with essential accuracy.

Just so the Holy Scripture, as given by divine inspiration to holy prophets, lies buried beneath the rubbish of centuries. It is covered over with the debris of the traditional interpretations of the multitudinous schools and sects. . . . The valleys of biblical truth have been filled up with the debris of human dogmas, ecclesiastical institutions, liturgical formulas, priestly ceremonies, and casuistic practices. Historical criticism is digging through this mass of rubbish. Historical criticism is searching for the rock-bed of the Divine word, in order to recover the real Bible. Historical criticism is sifting all this rubbish. It will gather out every precious stone. Nothing will escape its keen eye.

This passage might, in some respects, be seen as prophetic. Written almost exactly a hundred years ago, it foretells the twentieth century's concerted effort to uncover some of the Bible's deepest secrets, as will be documented in the chapters that follow. Briggs could only sense some of the changes that the new century would inaugurate: the flowering of archaeology as a science, bringing with it a new accuracy in the dating of ancient sites and a wealth of information about how biblical Israelites lived and even what they really
believed; the decipherment of literally thousands of ancient texts written by Israel's neighbors, which offer fresh insights into the history and culture of the ancient Near East; and a far more sophisticated understanding of the biblical text itself, shedding new light on the historical background of different biblical books as well as revealing the meaning of previously misunderstood words and verses and whole chapters. Yet along with its vision of the future, the above passage reveals Briggs's blind spot—one that he shared with the rest of his own and the next two or three generations of biblical critics. The "real Bible" he spoke of has proven to be a far more elusive item than he or they ever imagined. Indeed, as I hope to show, finding that real Bible may ultimately have something to do with all those traditional interpretations for which Briggs had only contempt—the "rubbish" or "débris" that he wished to sweep away in his search for the "rock-bed of the Divine word." The following chapters will attempt to tell that story too.

About the Author

This book is intended as a work of scholarship, albeit one addressed to a broad, general audience. In such circumstances, I would prefer that the author remain in the background. Yet I understand that some readers may justifiably want to know something about who I am and where I stand, the better to take the measure of what I have to say. So, if I owe them an account of myself, I would like it to be in the opening words of Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici:

For my Religion, though there be several Circumstances that might persuade the World I have none at all, (as the general scandal of my Profession, the natural course of my Studies, the indifference of my Behaviour and Discourse in matters of Religion, neither violently Defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention Opposing another;) yet, in despit of hercelf, I dare without usurpation assume the honourable Stile of a Christian.

If you were to substitute for "Christian" in this sentence "Orthodox Jew," it would pretty well sum things up for me. For those requiring further precision I should add that, as such, I am a believer in the divine inspiration of Scripture and an inheritor of many of the traditions of ancient interpreters cited in this book, indeed, a keeper of the Jewish sabbath, dietary laws, and all the other traditional practices of Orthodox Judaism. But I am also someone who has spent most of his life studying and teaching modern biblical scholarship.

* In today's English: scientific objectivity.
That puts me right in the middle of the dilemma to which this book is devoted.

I am afraid some of this may be lost in the pages that follow. They have a relentless refrain: people used to think X about this or that biblical figure or story or law or prophecy, but now modern scholars claim that Y is actually the case. In reporting on this, I may seem like an advocate of Y. Yet as I hope to argue in greater detail presently, Y is not all there is to the Bible. Knowing about the discoveries of modern scholars may certainly cause many people (as it has me) to think about Scripture in a somewhat different way. But what Scripture is, and how it is to be read, cannot ultimately be separated from still larger questions, questions about our very way of thinking about God, and about ourselves in relation to Him.

There is no magic bullet at the end of this book that will make all of modern scholarship's disturbing conclusions simply disappear; the dilemma this book describes is very real. To say this, I know, will not satisfy all readers. Indeed, I am sure that quite a few (including some of my fellow Orthodox Jews) will, after sampling a few pages, wish only to forget what they have read and throw the book across the room. This is hardly a comforting thought for me. If I have nonetheless gone ahead and written what I have, it is because I know full well that the questions raised by modern biblical scholarship are not going to go away. No small part of my purpose in surveying this scholarship's scope and conclusions is to lead into some consideration of their implications for people such as myself. (I should add that many of the theologians who have addressed themselves to the problems raised by modern biblical scholarship have tended to do so in the abstract, far from the nitty-gritty of that scholarship; this all too often leads to nice, abstract solutions, which, however, suddenly look a bit naïve when confronted with the actual details.) What I would like to do, therefore, is to present a fairly representative, detailed sample of what ancient and modern scholars have had to say about the Bible, and then conclude by examining the questions that this survey raises, sketching out one or two of my own thoughts about how a person might go about honestly confronting modern scholarship and yet not lose sacred Scripture in the process. In the meantime, my advice to readers is: keep your eye on the ancient interpreters.
NOTES

Citations here refer to author, date of publication, and, where relevant, page numbers within the cited work. For complete bibliographic information, please see www.jameskugel.com.

1. The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship

1. An important, and not unrelated, heresy trial had taken place in the previous decade, when the biblical scholar W. Robertson Smith was tried by the Scottish Free Church. For an account of his work and the trial, see Beidleman (1974). Worthy of mention also is the less well known case of Bishop J. W. Colenso of Natal in southern Africa, whose study, The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined (7 vols., 1862–79) was among the things that caused him to be accused of heresy by his superior, Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, in 1863. He was convicted the next year but was subsequently acquitted on a jurisdictional ruling. This notwithstanding, the English bishops voted to depose him in 1869; he continued to minister to a dwindling band of followers until his death in 1883. Indeed, Colenso had been mixed in controversy in South Africa and England since 1849, not only because of his views about the Bible, but also because of his criticism of British colonial policies with regard to the Zulus, to whom he ministered.

Colenso's masterwork is well surveyed in Rogerson (1984: 220–27), who calls the book "the most remarkable achievement by a British scholar in the field of Old Testament criticism in the nineteenth century" (232). Colenso's critique of traditional ideas was based in part on his reading of the work of earlier German and British scholars, and in part on his own careful analysis and original formulations. His seriousness of purpose did not prevent him from adopting at times a somewhat flippant approach to obvious problems in the text. See below, chapter 13, note 6.


4. Ludlow (1891: 11).


6. Ibid., p. 25.


8. Ibid., p. 38.


10. Many Christian Bibles include a group of biblical "apocrypha" or "deutero-canonical" works, and these include some further representatives of wisdom writing, such as The Wisdom of Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon.
11. I have explained at greater length some of the factors leading up to the rise of these ancient interpreters in Kugel and Greer (1986: 27–51).
13. It used to be argued that the Persians initiated their rule of Judea and other captured provinces by demanding a version of local laws, which might then be integrated with elements of Persian law as the province’s legal foundation; this, many scholars argued, might have served as a spur to the final editing of the Pentateuch, Judea’s local “law-code.” See Ezra 7:21, 25–26; E. J. Bickerman (1988), and Kugel (1998: 8–9). Lately, this line of argument has been contested (Watts, 2001). See below, chapter 21, note 33.
17. See Nahum 2:12 as explained in the Dead Sea Scrolls text 4Q169 Nahum Peshe.
20. Contrast this with Philo’s explanation in On the Virtues, 156–158, which presents no allegorical reading.
21. This is one reason why, in geographic terms, the allegorical approach was thus primarily associated with the city of Alexandria. As we have already glimpsed, Philo’s method of reading was picked up by Clement of Alexandria and other early Christians. See on this van den Hoo (1988). For the example of Clement’s use of Lev. 19:23 with regard to the development of faith, see pp. 99–100. Alexandrian Christians transmitted a number of Philo’s allegorical interpretations largely unchanged to later interpreters, including the influential Origen (ca. 185–254 CE). For the Alexandrian Christians overall, Scripture was thus a highly symbolic text, a pageant of spiritual and philosophical truths moving along, as it were, in the form of human beings and historical events.
22. If the city of Alexandria was associated with the allegorical approach to Scripture, its opposite number was another center of Christian learning, the city of Antioch (in northern Syria), The interpreters of Antioch are often said to have championed a more literal or historical approach to Scripture, and this is true; but along with this came a certain friendliness to the typological approach. Typology, as generally conceived, stays on the same level of human history; it simply seeks to find in the events described in the Old Testament hints to later historical events or teachings, things that belong to the time of the New. Christian typologists used various terms to describe these Old Testament hints: they were called shadows of pictures or types or figures of their New Testament counterparts—hence our use of words like foreshadowing or prefiguring or typology. How to Read the Bible was not an undisputed subject even in those days, and the fights over interpretive methods were sometimes bitter; in the end, however, both allegory and typology found a place in the Christian interpretative handbook. Indeed, although nowadays we clearly differentiate these two methods—allegory reads concrete things as if they represent abstract ones, while typology reads earlier things as foreshadowing later ones—this distinction was not always clear to early Christians; in fact, both approaches were sometimes simply called “allegory,” or else typology was called “prophetic allegory.” What was important was that both were nonliteral ways of reading, both part of Scripture’s sensus spiritualis. See on this Young (1997: 152–54, 165–85). Young also points out that, while describing typology (as I have) as acting on the “horizontal” axis of history has helped scholars focus on its most characteristic feature, there is more to typology than that. Types can have symbolic quality and “become windows through which we glimpse the ‘imprint of eternal truth’” (p. 152). What was new to me, as I read the exegetes, was the attempt to go beyond the sensus literalis to some deeper truth. Note also the classic study of Press (1969).
24. On the history of this little poem, written around 1260 by one Augustine of Dacia, and similar compositions, see de Lubac (1998: 1–14).
25. Dante’s ideas about allegory, and specifically his distinction in the Convivio between the three-
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fold “allegory of the poets” and the fourfold “allegory of the theologians,” has been extensively studied by Singleton (1954) and Hollander (1969). See also Cecchini (2000: 340–78).


27. The story of medieval Christian interpretation and the rise of scholasticism has been frequently treated, that of medieval Jewish exegesis somewhat less. In good conscience, therefore, I should at least name some of what is being omitted on the Jewish side—the initial persistence of midrashic interpretation, the difficulties with which it was raised by both Arab philosophy and the rise of Karaimism; the response of Sa'adya Gaon and, shortly afterward, the pursuit of biblical exegesis in medieval Spain, spurred on by the above-named forces as well as the development of a far more accurate understanding of Hebrew grammar and biblical lexicography. Crucial here is the work of the twelfth-century grammarians Jonah ibn Janah, Judah Hayyuj, Dunash ben Labrat, and the lexicographer Meïr ben Saruq; in northern France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries there arose a new center of Jewish exegesis, centering around Rashi and his school, some of whose members had direct contact with, and some influence on, the Christian exegeses of the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris. These contacts—now studied in numerous articles and monographs following Beryl Smalley’s pioneering work, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (1964)—served to arouse new interest among Christians in the sensus literalis after centuries of neglect. Important along the same lines were the Postillae of Nicholas de Lyra (1270–1340), studied by Halperin (1963). Two important syntheses among Jewish interpreters were the Provençal (France) commentator David Kimhi (1160–1235, called in Hebrew RaDaK) and his slightly later contemporary in Catalonia (Spain), Moses Nahmanides (1194–ca. 1270, RaMBaN). Both succeeded in fusing traditional Jewish learning with the new philology and other exegetical trends; noteworthy as well are the later medieval commentaries of Joseph ibn Kaspi (1275–1340), Levi b. Gerson (1288–1344; RaLBaG, Gerondites), as well as the commentaries of Isaac Abrabanel (ca. 1437–1508).

28. On Renaissance “humanists”—classical scholars—and their role in this sea change, see the studies of Kristeller (1974; 1979).

29. Conrad Pellican’s De modo legendi et intelligendi hebraica appeared in 1504, soon followed by J. Reuchlin’s more influential Hebrew grammar (1506), before which a Hebrew grammar had been written by Aldo Manuzio ca. 1500, and other, somewhat sketchier works apparently go back to the end of the fifteenth century. See Weil (1963: 249–52).

30. On the gradual overthrow of Jerome’s ideas about biblical poetry, see Kugel (1982: 218–64). The challenge to Jerome’s auctoritas as a translator began somewhat earlier, perhaps as early as the twelfth century in some quarters, but was not widespread; see Grabois (1975: 613–34).


32. It should be noted that this slogan, or complex of slogans, was not, however, the invention of the Reformers, nor ought the authority that they attributed to Scripture be thought of as a wholly new departure. See Esslinger (1979: 96–97), Pfäffner (1977).

33. Luther (1897: 96).


38. The story of modern biblical scholarship is thus basically a Protestant tale. Individual Roman Catholic historians have contributed arguments that ultimately supported the Documentary Hypothesis, for example, but they did so principally as a way of undercutting the Protestant reliance on Scripture alone; see below. Catholic scholars felt free to join the historical-critical approach to Scripture only after Pope Pius XII issued his encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu in 1943, which encouraged Catholics to enter the field (and even then, their entry was not altogether smooth); see Robinson (1988); also Brown (1990: xix). Indeed, after this pope’s death, a countermovement was launched; some bishops even refused to teach the encyclical, and a few did not believe it authentic, preferring to think it a Fascist forgery.

Jews were, until recently, also a very small part of this scholarly movement. Although the
modern, scholarly approach had met with some initial approval in liberal Jewish circles in the nineteenth century, support for it soon waned, in part because of its sometimes undignifiedly anti-Jewish character. See Ran Ha-Cohen, "The Encounter of Wissenschaft des Judentums in Germany with Nineteenth-Century Biblical Criticism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2003). Thus it was that the Jewish scholar Solomon Schechter observed that the "Higher Criticism" (that is, biblical source criticism and the like) was really the "higher anti-Semitism." See Schreiner (2003: 140–71). Schreiner concludes, "To this day, Christian and Jewish Bible studies have existed to a large extent on parallel lines." See also Spelling (1992). *Only after the middle of the twentieth century did Jews begin to enter the mainstream of biblical scholarship in any significant measure.*

39. To these two names ought to be added a third, that of the French Protestant scholar Isaac LaPeyrère. Now largely forgotten, LaPeyrère published his Præ-Adamitas in 1655. In this study he sought to prove that Adam was actually not the first human being created (a matter that was important to him because it would force a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin). This led him to suggest, in Book 4, that the story of Adam and Eve was not the work of the Divinely inspired Moses but of later writers (who may have used, he said, Moses' "notes"). LaPeyrère knew Hobbes and may have shown him the manuscript of *Prae-Adamitas* before Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*. As for Spinoza, his *Tractatus* was published only in 1670, but his questioning of traditional attributions of biblical authorship may go back to the 1650s, when he was essentially excommunicated by the Amsterdam Jewish community. Spinoza had a copy of LaPeyrère's book in his library—it is not clear when he might have read it. He probably had also read *Leviathan* by the time he wrote the *Tractatus*, since he uses proofs and even wording similar to that of Hobbes. For a fine attempt at unraveling the interrelationship of the three men and their works, see Malcolm (2002: 383–431).

40. *See ibid.* Ezra *ad Deut. 1:2.* Other problematic verses mentioned there are the "twelve," namely, the last twelve verses of Deuteronomy, which recount in the third-person Moses' death and burial; Deut. 31:22, which speaks of Moses writing down the song "on that day," as if it were some time before the writing of the rest; and Deut. 3:11, which asserts that the giant Og's bed is to be found in the city of Rabbah-Asmon (presumably, it could have been moved from Og's homeland of Bashan only long after the death of Moses).

41. *These and other examples from medieval Jewish exegetes were discussed by Samuel (1981: 22–24); Jon Levenson (1993: 62–81) more correctly assesses their significance in his essay "The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Simultaneity of Scripture." See also chapter 36.*

42. Among the many biblical scholars involved, mention should be made of the fifteenth-century Spanish Jesuit Toscanus (Tostado), who not only added further examples to those of ibn Ezra's list but also suggested that the Babylonians had actually destroyed Moses' Torah and that Ezra rewrote it. Another Roman Catholic, the Flemish priest Andreas Masius, published his commentary on the book of Joshua in 1574. There he suggested that Ezra was the author of the Pentateuch, having collected material from various sources (including the Book of the Wars of the Lord); Ezra edited and rewrote some of this material. (For example, Masius wrote, Hebron is not the old name of the city, but Kiryat Arba.) The Spanish Jesuit Beno Ferreira claimed during his lectures in the 1580s that the diaries and annals of Moses were put into shape long after his time by some other hand(s). For all these, see Malcolm (2002: 383–431).


44. *See the brief remarks of Finkelstein (1990: 73–77).*

45. Spinoza (1998: 90). Hobbes similarly asserted: "The light that must guide us in this question [of the Pentateuch] must be that which is held out to us from the Books themselves" (Hobbes 1686: 417).

46. For Spinoza (1998: 90), this language was Hebrew even for the New Testament writers, "since all the writers of both the Old and the New Testament were Hebrews."

47. Ibid., p. 91.

48. "Therefore, the question as to whether Moses did or did not believe that God is fire must in no wise be decided by the rationality or irrationality of this belief, but solely from the other pronouncements of Moses," Ibid., p. 91.

49. Ibid., 92.
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50. Ibid., 93.
51. "We may also discover whether or not it [Scripture] may have been contaminated by spurious intertions, whether errors have creep in, and whether these have been corrected by experienced and trustworthy scholars," Ibid., p. 92.
52. He deals with prophecy principally in the first two chapters of the Tractatus.
53. Ibid., 13–14.
54. Ibid., 22.
55. Ibid., 24.
57. Mention here should be made of Richard Simon, the Catholic author of the Histoire critique du Vieux Testament (1678); he is often cited alongside of Spinola as one of the seventeenth-century founders of modern scholarship. Simon was indeed a sophisticated Hebraist who not infrequently a number of arguments against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch; in particular, he highlighted internal contradictions within the text (Genesis 1 vs. Genesis 2), unnecessary repetitions, and inconsistencies of style. All this led him to suggest that the Pentateuch was actually a compilation of different sources—a striking anticipation of later theories. At the same time, his stance must be understood in the context of Catholic-Protestant polemics of the seventeenth century; see Malcolm, N. (2002: 414–24); also below, note 60. Somewhat different is the case of another early contributor to the Documentary Hypothesis, Johannes Clericus (Jean Le Clerc, 1657–1736). Clericus was a Huguenot and thus found himself on the opposite side of the Catholic-Protestant divide. A critic of Simon's book, he nevertheless went on to argue that the Pentateuch had been composed sometime after the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the eighth century. On his life and his somewhat odd theories about biblical poetry, see further in Kugel (1982: 247–51).
59. On Voltaire and the other encyclopédistes vis-à-vis the Bible, see the essays by Schwarzbach and Cotoni in Belavel and Bourel (1986: 759–803).
60. Throughout this period, Protestant scholars were pitted against Catholics in a rather unanticipated way. On the face of things, Protestants ought to have been on the forefront of questioning the tradition of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. After all, their whole movement derived from the questioning of such received traditions. Nonetheless, the Pentateuch itself does it clearly say that Moses was the author of these five books, although that is what traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation had long inferred. Deut. 31:9 says: "Then Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi . . . and to all the elders of Israel" (see also Deut. 31:24). The phrase this law (ha-torah hazot) is ambiguous; it might refer to the legal corpus of Deuteronomy (frequently referred to as "this law" within that book), or it might refer to the entire Pentateuch, which itself came to be known as the Torah. True, numerous later books refer to the Torah of Moses, though again, the reference is not absolutely clear (Josh. 8:31, 23:6, 24:26, 1 Kings 2:3, 2 Kings 14:6, 23:25, Mal. 3:22, Neh. 8:7, Dan. 9:11, 13; Ezra 3:2, 7:6, 2 Chr. 23:18, 30:16).

Since the Protestant movement was predicated on the overthrow of the Church's auctoritates, the Mosaic authorship should have been among the first things cast into doubt. But the only Protestant alternative to the Catholic Church's authority was Scripture itself; by Scripture alone would all matters be determined. In order for that to work, Scriptural authority had to be rock-solid—every word had to be the inspired word of God, the verbum Dei. That meant not only that Moses must have authored every word, but that he must also have communicated the Torah in such a way that all the potential ambiguities of the Hebrew writing system had been resolved by him. In practice, this meant that not only was every letter exactly what Moses had given, but even the little vowel-points that accompanied the text would have to be authentically Mosaic. See Kugel (1982: 258–64).

Catholics had no such problem—on the contrary, precisely because they held by Church traditions and the auctoritates of earlier figures, they declared (at the Fourth Tridastine Council) that Jerome's translation, the Vulgate, was the text for Catholics, more reliable than the Jews' then-current Hebrew text, which, they said, had undergone corruption and whose vowel-points were a later innovation. In this, they were aided by the research of Jewish scholars such as ibn Ezra and Elias Levita, who asserted (in 1538) that the vowel-points
were a later invention. See Weil (1963: 315). Some Catholics claimed that Ezra had completely rewritten Moses’ Torah—and that the Protestants were therefore fools to rely on it. Less radical Catholics, such as Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542—1621), maintained that the Hebrew Scriptures, while they contained errors, had not been deliberately tampered with or rewritten—after all, he observed, the Jews did not take out the Old Testament references to Jesus! While the Vulgate was thus the best text, one still needed Church doctrine to complete what Scripture left out or left unexplained.


62. Again, see Weil (1963).

63. Mention here should be made of the proposal by F. Masleff in his Grammaire hébraïque (1716) that Hebrew consonants be vocalized according to the first vowel in the name of the letter in question: thus, when the letter bet occurred in a word, it was normally to be vocalized as be, while a gemel should be vocalized as gi and a dalet as da. Thus the word consisting of the letters dalet, bet, and kaph should be vocalized as daheb. In addition, the letters alef, waw, beh, bet, yod, and ‘ayn also sometimes functioned as vowel signs, representing, respectively, the vowels a, e, i, u, o, and a. The name of Moses, written with the letters mem, waw, shin, and beh, should thus be pronounced: Meshi. This ‘nappy’ system actually won other adherents, including, prominently, Charles F. Houbigant (1686—1784). See on him, J. W. Rogerson (forthcoming).

64. Since the rise of Christianity, Jews had maintained that ‘almah means only “young woman.” For a reflection of the debate, see Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 84; Hirschman (1996: 31–41, 55–66).


66. Barr (1983: 48) has suggested that such an approach is effectively dyed in the wool in Christianity, a consequence of the very nature of that faith: “Romans is authoritative because St. Paul is authoritative, and still more the Gospels have authority because of Jesus Christ, the person and his life, of which they tell. Christianity as a faith is not directed in the first place towards a book, but towards the persons within and behind that book and the life of the ancient community which was their context and in which they made themselves known” (italics mine). This statement would be true if, in place of “Christianity,” one were to substitute the words “Liberal Protestantism.” Certainly Scripture in early and medieval Christianity (as well as in Roman Catholicism and some Protestant denominations on into later periods) was predicated on an undifferentiated faith in Scripture and the events it related. It was only with the rise of modern biblical scholarship that a dissonance developed between what Scripture said and the real-life happenings that might presumably stand behind Scripture’s words. It may indeed be (as Barr’s observation suggests) that it was in confronting such a dissonance in the Gospels in particular that many Protestants felt compelled to distance themselves from Scripture in favor of a more credible account of “what really happened.” The Gospels were indeed the make-or-break case; as Barr later observes: “It is the Gospels that are the supreme source and the supreme problem area for historical revelation. It is in them that something is narrated of which one may say that, broadly speaking, if this did not happen, then there is no salvation and faith is vain” (p. 99). Thus, “something” basic referred to in the Gospel narrative had to be maintained as true, even if the narration of that “something” could be shown to have been amplified by human hands and frequently flawed, contradictory, or even unreasonable. It is easy to see how such an approach then came to characterize their reading of the Old Testament as well. For such Protestants, it was no longer the biblical story of Abraham, but the real person Abraham summoned to Canaan, and the reconstruction of the historical circumstances in which his “call” took place, that became the new Scripture. See also chapter 36.

67. This evolution has been explored in detail in Frei (1974).

68. Mention here should be made of the earlier scholars J. D. Michaelis (1717—1791), Johann Semler (1722—1791), and J. G. Eichhorn (1752—1827) all of whom contributed mightily to the scientific study of the Bible’s history of composition and the attempt to understand it in its historical context; their work helped set the stage for nineteenth-century German scholarship. There were, of course, modern biblical scholars outside of Germany in the nineteenth century. On S. R. Driver, see Emerton (2002: 123–38).
69. This was first recognized by K. D. Ilgen in 1798; see Seidel (1933), but later rediscovered and popularized in Germany by Hupfeld (1853).

70. At first scholars had conceived of two E-writers, designated E¹ and E². This was Hupfeld's designation, for example, in previous notes. It was K. H. Graf who came to identify the author of the priestly laws and other passages such as a Genesis 1 (designated by Hupfeld as E¹) as a priestly writer, P, who lived after D, not before. That would explain, he said, why D appears unaware of the priestly laws in Exodus-Numbers. (Lately, this conclusion has come under attack; see chapter 19.) There are many summaries of the development of the Documentary Hypothesis; among the best: Hayes (1979: 115–20); Eisfeldt (1965: 158–70); Nicholson (1998: 3–28); and Rohmer (2006: 9–27).

71. Wellhausen first published this work under the title Geschichte Israel’s, 1 (Berlin, 1878); he renamed it Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israel’s for the second (Berlin, 1883) and subsequent editions. Citations herein are from the translation by W. Robertson Smith (= Wellhausen, 1918).


73. Wellhausen, Prolegomena, 361.

74. See Brismam (1978).

75. Used in the philosophical sense of ontological simplicity, as discussed in Quine (1981).

76. The Wellhausen four-source approach to the Pentateuch survived long into the twentieth century, but its details have frequently been the subject of controversy. From the beginning, some scholars had found it necessary to hypothesize additional sources or editors to account for J’s complexity; in truth, they said, there are not four major sources but at least five or six. Wellhausen himself had suggested that his J actually represented a complex of different editions (J¹, J², and J³) and the same for E (E¹, E², and E³). Karl Budde similarly distinguished two different authors, J¹ and J²: Die biblische Urgeschichte (Giessen, 1883). Rudolf Smend similarly saw two J sources; Die Erzählung des Hexateuch auf ihre Quellen untersucht (Berlin, 1912). For all these see de Pury and Römer (1989: 24–30). Discontent with the unity of J was certainly fueled by the popularity of Gunkel’s ideas, on which see next note and chapter 3. Smend’s J¹ became L (for “lay source”) in Otto Eisfeldt’s terminology (1967: 194–99) and N (for “nomadic source”) in Fohrer and Sellin (1965: 173–79). See Nicholson (1998: 43–44); Skj (2000). Nor has the multiplication of sources been limited to J and E; again, see below. This complexity has not gone away; on the contrary, it has only been compounded by more recent research. A second priestly source, II (long ago regarded but once considered minor), has been argued by some to have had a major role in the Pentateuch’s final form; on the work of Israel Knohl, Jacob Milgrom, Baruch Schwartz, and others, see chapter 19. Meanwhile other scholars have questioned the very existence of any continuous text by a J or an E, as well as their subsequent combination into a history (JE). Instead, attention has focused on the role of D as a potential editor of disparate materials whose origins and earlier form are basically unknowable. Thus, speaking of J as a source is, these scholars say, an illusion, since the letter J actually stands for a congeries of traditions and texts stretching over a broad chronological range. The latter approach—in some ways descended from Gunkel’s—has been championed in particular by the German scholar Rolf Rendtorff (1977) and his student Erhard Blum (1985; 1990). Despite some similarities in their conclusions, a profound methodological difference separates them. In particular, Blum has sought to argue, through detailed analysis of different passages, that major elements of the Bible’s first four books are simply a reflection of parts of Deuteronomy and that these follow, rather than precede, Deuteronomy’s composition; they therefore belong to the exile or postexilic period. Blum had his predecessors; see Van Seters (1979: 663–75). If so, how can one talk about J’s “theology,” as, for example, Gerhard von Rad did? See Rendtorff’s dispute with von Rad and others (1975: 138–66). One refinement of this argument holds that behind the Pentateuch’s history ultimately stand two “rival myths” of Israel’s origins, the first focusing on the stories of Israel’s remote ancestors, the patriarchs, the second on the tradition of the Exodus from Egypt as Israel’s founding event. See Schmid (1999) and Dozeman and Schmid (2006), with essays by Dozeman and Schmid, as well as E. Blum, A. de Pury, T. C. Römer, and others. See also next note, as well as chapter 6, notes 17, 18, and 19. At the same time, numerous scholars have risen to the defense of
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Notes


77. Wellhausen's ideas were disturbing to traditional belief, but in his view at least some parts of the Pentateuch were fairly old; his younger contemporary Hermann Gunkel (again, see chapter 3) posited an early stage of orally transmitted tales, some presumably going back to the period before David and the United Monarchy (tenth century BCE). In recent years, however, a school of "minimalist" historians has arisen, some of whose members seek to claim that the entire Bible was written during a century or two of the post-exilic period. Thus, the stories of Abraham and Jacob, Moses and the Exodus, and the Sinai covenant—long felt to reflect an early period in Israel's history (even if they were not written precisely in the period in which these people lived)—are now viewed by members of this school as having been written only in the period of the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE), or even later, to the period of Persian domination of Israel's homeland. Two important works in opening this line of inquiry were: Thompson (1974) and Van Seters (1975); see also Van Seters (1994 and 1999). These authors' first works more or less coincided with the dissertation of Schmid (1976). A similar line is followed by Levin (1993), who argues that J's depiction of the patriarchs building altars around the countryside is essentially a polemic directed against the centralization of cultic worship advocated by D. On other aspects of the minimalist approach, see below, as well as chapter 6, notes 17 through 19.

Their arguments have not necessarily prevailed—a great many scholars still feel such a late dating is untenable—but they have introduced a new element of uncertainty in a major area of biblical scholarship. "It is doubtful...that any theory of the composition of the Pentateuch will again command the kind of consensus enjoyed by the documentary hypothesis in the past" (J. J. Collins 1999: 460) (review of Nicholson). Note also the recent review of things by R. Rendtorff (2006). About the only thing that scholars are still prepared to agree on is that the traditional view of the Pentateuch's origin—as the inspired word of God given to Moses after the Exodus—cannot possibly be true and that the text of the Pentateuch is a composite of different sources.

78. Cited in Massa (1990: 37).

79. The formulation goes back to the German historian Leopold von Ranke. Ranke's historical ideas played a crucial role in the emergence of biblical scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany as well as in the "spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age," as noted by Massa (1990: 3–21).


82. Ibid.