

Appendix 1: Apologetics and “Biblical Criticism Lite”

(Note: this was originally an appendix to *How to Read the Bible*)

I have a premonition that some readers of the present volume – especially my fellow academics, as well as some divinity school students, ministers, and perhaps a few educated laymen – will react to its main argument with a yawn. Such people have grown used to the idea that the Bible really wasn’t written by those figures long claimed to be its authors, that it is full of contradictions and editorial overlays, etiological narratives and invented history. “Yes, Virginia, there is no Santa Claus,” they will say. “We are all a little older and wiser now, and some of our old illusions have fallen away. But really, that’s not so bad – in fact, it’s not bad at all. We embrace the truth about the Bible as we now know it.”

I understand this reaction, but I don’t think it tells the whole story. I have noticed that these same people, especially when it comes to talking about actual texts – in biblical commentaries or introductions to the Old Testament – are often not nearly as blasé as their yawn might indicate (nor as committed to the “truth about the Bible as we now know it”). On the contrary, what they have to say often has an unmistakably apologetic tone: “Yes, it’s true, modern scholars have shown X, but still...” Indeed, this “Yes, but still...” way of talking about the Bible is so common nowadays it might practically be described as a reflex, a built-in or automatic way of trying to downplay the results of modern scholarship (yielding what might be called “Biblical Criticism Lite”) and thereby minimizing its implications.

So, as we have seen, the Bible’s Flood story is nowadays generally held to be a recasting of an ancient Mesopotamian legend – one that even retains some of the original wording of the Mesopotamian texts from which it was taken. A commentator who had truly made his or her peace with modern scholarship would point out these resemblances and leave it at that. But time and time again, what commentators actually do is go on to stress *how unlike* its Mesopotamian model is the biblical version:

When one compares the biblical story [of the Flood] with the Gilgamesh Epic, great differences leap to attention. To be sure, this account too has naïve anthropomorphic touches, like the statement that YHWH shut the door of the Ark (Gen. 7:16b), or that YHWH smelled the pleasing fragrance of Noah's sacrifice (9:12). But these details, inherited from the popular tradition, do not obscure the central view that YHWH, the sole God (in contrast to Babylonia's many gods), acts in human affairs in a meaningful and consistent way (in contrast to the caprice of the Babylonian deities).¹

Similarly:

Throughout the flood story, then, Genesis paints a completely different portrait of God from the standard ancient theology [of Mesopotamia]. Most obviously, there is only one God. This means that all power belongs to him: it is not shared out unequally among different members of a pantheon. But just as important is the character of the divinity revealed by the flood story. He is still personal: anthropomorphic language is freely used to describe God's thoughts and attitudes. But the failings that too often characterize humanity and the Babylonian deities are eliminated. God is not fearful, ignorant, greedy, or jealous. He is not annoyed by man's rowdiness, but by his depravity. Not partiality but justice dictates the salvation of Noah.²

Likewise:

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* there is recognition that humanity has committed misdeeds worthy of retribution, but the Babylonian version does not reflect the moral outrage found in Genesis. Also, we can turn to another Mesopotamian tale, *Atrahasis*, in which the god Enlil initiates a campaign of terror against the human family because its prodigious growth has created a noise too loud to tolerate. After repeated forays of plague and famine, Enlil undertakes a cataclysmic flood. Genesis, on the other hand, shows that God is not inconvenienced by human achievement; human achievement is, on the contrary, the consequence of his

¹ B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), 164.

² G. J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary vol 1: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 164-65.

bountiful blessing. Rather, he acts in accord with ethical demands, agitated only by the wicked gains cooperate depravity has mounted.³

And yet again:

[Israel's] version, therefore, for all the tangible connections here and there, is as different from the whole [Mesopotamian] story as possible. The Babylonian version, along with many poetic merits, shows a very crude, polytheistic conception of God.⁴

My purpose is not to ask whether these assertions are really true, but why commentators so consistently feel called upon to make them. The answer is obvious. They feel torn between what they would like the Bible to be – an utterly unique, divinely inspired book given to mankind – and what modern scholarship has sought to show about this particular story, that it is essentially borrowed from Mesopotamian sources (and therefore *not*, on the face of things, an utterly unique, divinely inspired composition). So there *has to be* a world of difference between the biblical and Mesopotamian versions despite the obvious similarities. The differences commentators fix on, however, are really not very convincing. Thus, these scholars are fudging a bit when they imply that part of the biblical tale's uplifting message is that YHWH is the "sole God." In its recasting of this story, the Bible may have changed "the gods" to God (it would certainly have been surprising if it had not), but there is actually nothing in the narrative that asserts that He is the only God in the world. Monotheism is simply not part of this story's concerns. Moreover, the claim that God in this tale "acts in human affairs in a meaningful and consistent way" seems odd – what, by first deciding to create humanity and then deciding to destroy it?⁵

We have seen a number of stories in Genesis in which the biblical hero acts rather unheroically, even unethically. And why *should* the hero be a moral exemplar? Everything scholars have learned about these tales indicates that they often were

³ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26 (The New American Commentary vol. 1a)*, (Broadman & Holman, 1995), 339-40.

⁴ G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary (OTL)* ((Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 124

⁵ Similarly, the claim in the previous passage cited to the effect that the book of Genesis as a whole shows that "God is not inconvenienced by human achievement" makes one wonder about the Tower of Babel narrative. Wasn't God disturbed in that story precisely because "nothing that they [human beings] set out to do will be impossible for them"?

etiological in nature – certainly they were not originally intended as lessons in ethics. They acquired that status only thanks to the ancient interpreters. But once a Bible always a Bible, so many otherwise hard-nosed commentaries seek somehow to preserve the high moral standing of the main figures in Genesis even in the most dubious cases.

One such instance is the narrative in which Jacob gets his brother Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew. For modern scholars, this is an etiological narrative designed to explain how the “younger brother” Israel came to dominate its once more powerful neighbor Edom. Yet that hardly sits well with the old idea of the Bible as a book replete with moral instruction, in which figures like Jacob are necessarily models of ethical probity. So, at least in a great many modern commentaries and introductions, the etiological side of things is down-played as the commentator desperately seeks to save Jacob’s reputation:

Esau parts with the birthright. – The superiority of Israel to Edom is popularly explained by a typical incident, familiar to the pastoral tribes bordering on the desert, where the wild huntsman would come famishing to the shepherd’s tent to beg for a morsel of food. At such times the ‘man of the field’ is at the mercy of the tent-dweller; and the ordinary Israelite would see nothing immoral in a transaction like this, where the advantage is pressed to the uttermost.⁶

Here, one cannot but notice the delicately worded heading, “Esau *parts with* the birthright,” along with the (quite unsupported) assertion that this was a “typical incident” in ancient times. Note also the implied description of Esau as “wild,” and the insinuation that Jacob was a shepherd – neither of these has any basis in this biblical narrative itself. Finally, the commentator’s observation that “an ordinary Israelite” would see nothing immoral in Jacob’s behavior is meant to argue against our own, unavoidable impression that Jacob was indeed doing something worthy of condemnation.

Another commentator sums up the episode thus:

Esau, slave of his appetites, fell into Jacob’s trap like a hungry bird.⁷

⁶ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary) (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1910), 361.

⁷ J. H. Tullock, *The Old Testament Story* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), p. 50

I suppose every starving person might be described as a slave of his appetites, but what exactly was Jacob's "trap"? There is no indication that he planned to cook up his lentils so as to tempt Esau, only that he cruelly withheld them after Esau showed up until Esau would agree to the deal. Yet another scholar opines:

The purpose of the action is to illustrate the superiority of the younger brother, who is astute and farsighted. Esau's words and actions are a deliberate caricature: he is uncouth, coarse, and stupid. Jacob, on the contrary, is farsighted; he thinks of the future and is determined to rise in the world.⁸

Talk about apologetics: Phew!

The Bible is not here condoning what has been obtained by trickery. On the contrary, the way the narrative is handled makes clear that Jacob has a claim on the birthright wholly and solely by virtue of God's predetermination. In the other words, the presence of the oracle in the story [in Gen. 25:23] constitutes, in effect, a moral judgment upon Jacob's behavior.⁹

Here, at least, the commentator is prepared to accept that Jacob behaved unethically (though again, it was not so much by "trickery" as by exploitation). But he goes on to say what the biblical text does not even imply, that Jacob's *real* claim to his brother's birthright comes "wholly and solely by virtue of God's predetermination" as expressed in Gen. 25:23. On the contrary, what this story says is that Jacob *officially* acquired his brother's birthright thanks to Esau's sale of it in extreme circumstances. That's why Jacob makes Esau *take an oath*, to make it official. The rest is just the commentator's wishful thinking; there is no hint of any "moral judgment upon Jacob's behavior" in the story itself.

The same apologetic mode characterizes modern scholars' handling of an earlier incident, in which Abraham tells his wife to say she is his sister in order to save his own neck. About this story one commentator opines:

It is impossible for God to make of Abram a great nation if Abram is dead before he fathers one child. How can God give Canaan to Abram's seed if he has no

⁸ C. Westermann, *Genesis* (London: T & T. Clark: 1987) 183.

⁹ N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1970) 183.

seed? To prevent such a possibility, Abram must do all he can to stay alive. He is giving YHWH a little assistance in a potentially embarrassing situation!¹⁰

In other words, Abraham wasn't really being cowardly, he was just trying to help God out. But why should this commentator, and others,¹¹ feel compelled to apologize for Abraham's behavior when the biblical text so clearly does not? On the contrary, it seems to glory in the success of his deception.

Moving on: does the narrative in the book of Exodus play fast and loose with the facts, asserting all kinds of things that modern scholars have found to be untrue?

That Israel's faith encouraged a broad freedom in the handling of history in these stories is owing to nothing else so much as a passion for conveying the wonder of the Exodus itself. Methodically and purposefully, each episode sustains the tension as it build to its climax.¹²

Has modern feminist scholarship revealed the Bible to be a fundamentally patriarchal document, riddled with sexism and female stereotypes? Look a little deeper:

This [the story of Rahab the harlot, Josh. 2:1-21] is a tale of a woman who is both cunning trickster, securing her family's future, and praiseworthy host, protecting her endangered guests in accordance with ancient norms of hospitality. In the midst of the virile game of war, with its masculine adventures in espionage, one woman seizes opportunity from the jaws of crisis and, by a shrewd and assertive use of the unusual freedom offered by her unenviable profession, saves both herself and her family. She traps and pressures these young spies to extract what she wants: life and a future. Rahab acts wisely because she perceptively discerns the deeper truth of the situation.¹³

From a relatively early time, some researchers suggested that the Deutero-Isaiah's references to the suffering "servant of the LORD" cannot reasonably be taken as

¹⁰ V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 383.

¹¹ See also: Skinner, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 248-49; W. J. Harrelson, ed. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 29.

¹² J. K. West, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 164.

¹³ R. D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary (OTL)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 47.

prophecies about Jesus (even though they are treated as such in the Gospels). But this was a hard pill for many Christian commentators to swallow. So, while not arguing the Jesus connection directly, many sought to assert that these passages were somehow special, different from the rest of the book of Isaiah. Christened the “Servant Songs” (though truly, there was nothing songlike about them!), they were sometimes alleged to have been composed quite separately from their surrounding texts:¹⁴

The[se] songs represent a special strand within the book of Deutero-Isaiah, and therefore they did not come into being at the same time as their contexts. Nevertheless, they owe their origin to Deutero-Isaiah.¹⁵

They are marked out not only by a special theme, independent from that of the rest of the work, but also by the fact that they have evidently been interpolated in their present context, from which they can be removed without any resultant damage or interruption.¹⁶

The text itself offers no real support for such assertions, and most scholars have now come to reject them.¹⁷ Understandably, however, it is still hard for some readers to let go completely. Thus, even while denying any specific connection to Jesus, commentators have continued to see the “servant of the LORD” as a messianic figure¹⁸ – though again, the text offers little outright support for this – or at least to evoke the suffering of Jesus

¹⁴ This idea goes back to Duhm; see the review of scholarship in T. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Axiom* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983), 1-15.

¹⁵ C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (OTL) (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 92. Am I wrong to understand the intention of the last sentence to be: “They are indeed separate, but that does not mean they are the work of a mere editor or interpolator, but the work of the authentic prophet, Deutero-Isaiah himself?”

¹⁶ A. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London, 1976), 313; cited in Mettinger, *Farewell*, 12.

¹⁷ It was denied by K. Budde, E. König, E. J. Kissane, N. H. Snaith, and others; it is refuted in detail in Mettinger, *Farewell*. Charles Torrey put the case clearly in 1928: “But this view of the [servant] passages as separate or separable is utterly mistaken. They are not in any sense complete in themselves, nor even possessed of characteristics not shared by the rest of the book of which they form a part. To make them separate ‘poems’ of them is like selecting certain details of a great landscape-painter’s masterpiece and styling each a ‘picture’” *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* (New York: Scribners, 1928) 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47. Note also: “[Isa.] 52:13-53:12, after echoing clearly traits from the earlier songs, unmistakably abandons the realm of the biographical, on the basis of which we thought we could understand what the servant’s office was, and gives a picture of the true servant of YHWH which far transcends the personal experience of the prophet. Thus it is not by chance or by ineptitude that Isa. 53 has again and again been understood as alluding to the figure of the one that is to come” –W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 33.

and his crucifixion in the process of commenting on Isa. 52:13-53:12.¹⁹ As the very last of apologetic options, the identity of the “servant of the LORD” is alleged to be one of Scripture’s great mysteries:

The poems are concerned with a particular figure (historical or metaphorical?), but the identity of that figure is completely enigmatic...It is fair to say that although interpretation is completely bewildered by the specificity of the text that we simply do not understand, at the same time the broad thematic outlines of the text are enormously suggestive and continue to be generative of interpretation.²⁰

Clear and concise though the song is, its interpretation is very difficult. On three matters we are left in the dark. Who is the servant here designated by God for a task? What is the nature of the task? And in what context is the designation made? Exegesis must never ignore the limits thus put upon it. The cryptic, veiled language used is deliberate. This is true of every one of the servant songs alike. From the very outset there must be no idea that exegesis can clear up all their problems.²¹

It is true that the references to the “servant of the LORD” in the latter part of the book of Isaiah are somewhat inconsistent, sometimes implying that he is a metaphorical representation of Israel as a whole, sometimes a *pars pro toto*, sometimes the book’s speaker himself. But there are a lot of inconsistencies in Scripture, and even a lot of unidentified figures. Does not the insistence on this one’s “cryptic” and “enigmatic” nature arise from a desire, unconscious perhaps, to single him out because of the role he used to play in Christian exegesis – indeed, even to hold out the hope that his very mysteriousness will leave enough room for him somehow, despite everything scholars have come to know, to be reconnected to the Good News of Christianity?

For the most part, prophetic texts have retained their capacity to speak to modern readers without interpretive apology: their denunciations of immorality and hypocrisy,

¹⁹ Even the hard-headed Otto Eissfeldt asserted that modern scholarship “has undoubtedly helped to pave the way for a deeper assessment of the truth incorporate in the figure of the [“servant of the LORD”], namely that vicarious suffering by the innocent is man’s highest good, a truth which in Jesus’ suffering and death is made a reality bringing salvation” (cited in R. Loewe, “Prolegomenon” to S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (New York: KTAV, 1969). In fairness it should be noted that Jewish commentators as well have sought messianic allusions in these passages.

²⁰ W. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 141.

²¹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 93.

along with their call for people to care for society's weakest members, address us as clearly today as they did Israelites two and half millennia ago. No wonder that the words of Amos and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah tend to feature prominently in sermons and other public forums. But even here there are problems. As we have seen, one popular prophetic genre was the so-called "oracle against the nations" (OAN), in which the prophet denounces one or several of ancient Israel's neighbors and forecasts their imminent downfall. Understandably, such passages tend not to be featured in sermons; they are not, we like to think, part of the prophet's *true* message. But aren't they? Here the historian and the preacher often part ways, if only through the latter's selective filtering of the text. But even a scholar doing his best to report on the reality of the biblical world may, confronted with such passages, sometimes slip into the apologetic mode:

The book [of Obadiah] has often been criticized for vindictiveness, but the association of justice with vengeance is found throughout the Old Testament and especially in the prophetic corpus. If Obadiah seems especially vindictive, this is due to the brevity of the book, which allows this theme to dominate to an unusual degree. The desire for vengeance was not unprovoked. The underlying assumption is that one people should not exploit the misfortune of another, and that such exploitation is especially heinous in the case of neighbors and relatives.²²

Obvious borrowings from ancient Near Eastern literature, etiological tales devoid of any ethical message, sexism, bloodthirsty denigrations of foreigners, anonymous prophecies utterly disconnected from the New Testament – none of these has been particularly comforting to modern scholars. Surprisingly, however, scholars do not usually tread lightly over such passages; rather, they hone in on them in order to claim that they are at least somewhat other than what they might seem – basically ethical, egalitarian, and perhaps even a little Christian. That is to say, they feel drawn to apologize for them rather than simply leave them as is.

Apologetics are a sign of an underlying anxiety. The anxiety in this case derives from the inescapable fact that, in the light of all that modern scholarship has discovered, the Bible necessarily looks very different from the way it looked only a century or so ago. Yet these commentators still want it to be the Bible in the old sense – divinely inspired (at

²² J. J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 375.

least in some attenuated way), a guide to proper conduct and proper beliefs, a book of truth and not falsehood, as free of error and internal contradiction as possible, in short, despite everything they know, a book still worthy of being called the Word of God. Their repeatedly apologetic remarks give the lie, I think, to the claim that people schooled in modern scholarship, even those at the forefront of biblical research, have entirely made their peace with its implications. They may sometimes sound blasé, but the truth, it seems to me, is that most of them are simply doing the best they can to have it both ways, to have their Bible and criticize it too.

Biblical Theology

One area in which apologetics have played a special role is in extended treatments of biblical theology, or, in the present instance, what is called Old Testament theology. Back in the days before modern scholarship, the Bible was just held to be true in all of its details: open it up and you could find out what to think and do. In practice, however, much of the heavy lifting was done through a series of Christian creeds, which set out in precise, schematic form what a person was actually to believe. Even after the rise of Protestantism, some of these creeds survived in different denominations, but the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* diminished their importance and laid upon Scripture much of the task of providing Protestants with guidance in matters of faith.

It did not take long for critical scholars to see that the Bible often does *not* speak with one voice. Certainly the New Testament's teachings were different from the Old's, but even the Old Testament was not always consistent. Various parts disagreed with one another, either because they were written at different times or because they came from different authors (often representing different schools or social strata) who had conflicting interests and agendas. If so, then what *was* a person to believe – what E says about vicarious punishment or what Ezekiel says? After a while, scholars also came to view the Bible's history-writing as unreliable, as “what really happened” was shown again and again to be at variance with the biblical record. For such reasons, starting in the late eighteenth century, the task of theologians began to change.²³ Now, part of their job

²³ A crucial step, as many scholars point out, was announced in the inaugural lecture of Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826) at the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787, in which he distinguished biblical theology from dogmatic theology. The latter, Gabler said, consists of the effort of ordinary human beings – theologians – to transmit theological truths as best they can for their own age and their own schools or denominations; the former, by contrast, has “a historical character, transmitting what the sacred writers thought about divine matters.” Once this distinction had been made, the *biblical* theologian's task came to be the assembling the opinions of biblical writers on various concepts and ideas, which should then be “carefully compared with one another.” Such comparison, needless to say, was necessitated by the perception that these sacred writers did not always agree with one another. See G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 21-23.

was to isolate the basic ideas and concepts in different parts of the Bible and study them separately and in comparison to one another (this was called “*biblical* theology”). The results of this effort might then serve as the raw material for religious thinkers to use in creating a somewhat Bible-based set of teachings for the modern world (dogmatic theology). In the process, of course, one might conveniently dispose of anything obviously untrue or ideologically unacceptable, separating out such extraneous material from the “main” concepts of various biblical writers.²⁴ It was no longer the Bible itself that spoke to moderns, but the theological rewrite thereof.

This is not the place for a review of the history of biblical theology over the past two centuries. But I do not think it would be much of an exaggeration to say that at least part of that history has involved great efforts on the part of theologians to save the Bible from itself, that is, to save its old role as a source of divine teachings from everything scholars now know about what it once meant and how it came into existence. In particular, the act of selecting *some* ideas or laws or institutions as theologically significant has always helped to save the Bible from all the other things that scholars were learning about it.

From Wellhausen on, students of Israelite religion have thought of it in evolutionary terms: it started off as primitive, Wellhausen said, perhaps animistic, and then evolved into the lofty religion of the prophets before descending into priestly ceremony and Jewish legalism. This scheme soon left its mark on biblical theology, but here the trajectory was perforce somewhat different, since Christian theologians sought to view Christianity itself as the completion and natural end-point of Israel’s religion. Things could not start down, go up, and then come down again. Instead, the task of Old Testament theology became, for some, tracing the stages and main ideas of the Old Testament that prepared the way for Christianity. Again, this task was made easier by the very mix-and-match nature of the undertaking; anything that was incompatible with Christianity was, by definition, able to be rejected in the developmental scheme. Here surely was an apologetic opportunity of enormous potential, and one that has been fully exploited over the last century.

²⁴ James Barr has stated the matter with characteristic clarity: “The character of theologies as organizations [of biblical material] makes the working of scriptural authority more complicated. What is the relation of these structures to the total body of scriptural material? The common procedure seems to be thus: certain elements in scripture are picked out and taken as essential framework for the organization, which is then re-applied to the reading of the scripture as a whole.” And again: “In this sense traditional orthodoxy is a monumental example of ‘picking and choosing’ that it deprecates in others” – *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 39-40. See also J. J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 132-42.

Along somewhat similar lines, numerous theologians have sought to identify the basic message of the Old Testament with a single, overriding theme, sometimes called the Old Testament's theological "center."²⁵ That theme was at first held to be monotheism itself,²⁶ but later, other possibilities were substituted: the idea of a divine covenant between man and God; God's "lordship"; God's holiness; God's choice of Israel as His people; and yet others. The very idea of such a mega-theme might, in its own way, serve a "Yes, but still..." approach: modern scholarship may have uncovered some cracks and breaks in the Bible's walls, but still, there was no denying the great message that emerged despite these discouraging details.

One great theme made popular in America in the twentieth century was that of God's saving acts in history.²⁷ Influenced by Albright and his students, theologians saw the Bible as the record of a unique people who, having cast their lot with an equally unique deity, entered Canaan as outsiders. (Here again, it was the events behind the text that were important; what the Bible said was just the starting point.) The Hebrew Bible was thus essentially the record of the Israelites' new faith pitting them against the very different norms of their neighbors. Theologians therefore highlighted the great gap that separated Israel from its broader environment: the egalitarianism of its laws and social ethos; its unique sense of history as opposed to timeless myth;²⁸ prophecy as a uniquely Israelite institution, and the relationship between God and man upon which it is predicated; the Bible's absolute condemnation of magic, necromancy, and the like, as

²⁵ The notion of such a "center" (*Mitte*) was made explicit in W. Eichrodt's promotion of covenant as the central concept of the Old Testament, but its roots are deeper, identifiable even in Spinoza's assertion that it was only the items of which all biblical books agree, such as monotheism or ideas about governance, that had prescriptive value today. See Hasel, *OT Theology*, 77-103. About this assumption Gerhard von Rad wrote: "What's it all about with this almost *unisono*-asked question about the 'unity,' the 'center' of the Old Testament? Is it something so self-evident [that] its proof belongs, so to speak, as a *conditio sine qua non* to an orderly Old Testament theology?" (cited in Collins, *Bible After Babel*, 135). The answer is that it is all about getting the Bible to continue having some theologically valid teachings to offer despite its many now-unacceptable particulars.

²⁶ This approach goes back to Spinoza, but was vigorously re-adopted by the Jewish theologian Yehezkel Kaufman – not particularly convincingly, as it turned out.

²⁷ The roots of what was to become a major theme in twentieth century Protestant neo-orthodoxy, the Bible as *Heilsgeschichte* or a "history of salvation," can be traced back to the seventeenth century; see Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 46-47, 173-82. In its later manifestation, however, it has introduced a fundamental theological contradiction: see Langdon Gilkey's essay on the theological assumptions of G. Ernest Wright and other exponents of the "mighty acts of God": "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961), 194-205. See also R. Gnuse, *Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989); idem, "New Directions in Biblical Theology: the Impact of Contemporary Scholarship in the Hebrew Bible," *JAAR* 62 (1994), 893-918.

²⁸ Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and Israel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1967) 1-122, played an important role in overthrowing this conception, arguing for a fundamental continuity in historical thinking between Israel and its ancient Near Eastern neighbors.

opposed to their place of honor in other ancient religions; and others. (This sharp discontinuity between Israel and its neighbors also held an obvious message for today. *Go and do thou likewise*, it said; stand up for your own religious values in the face of modern society.) This approach also involved a certain amount of apologetic interpretation, and it eventually ran into trouble when scholarship began to call into question the version of Israelite history on which it was based (in particular, the historicity of the exodus and conquest narratives) as well as, one by one, the allegedly unique aspects of biblical Israel.²⁹

As scholars wrestled with the Bible's internal inconsistencies, apparent errors, exaggerations, and similar flaws, theologians felt themselves called upon to articulate afresh the crucial concept of the divine inspiration of Scripture. As noted in chapter 36, various sorts of inspiration were now distinguished, and these too had an apologetic ring: "limited verbal inspiration," "non-textual inspiration," "content inspiration," "inspired experiences," "social inspiration," and so forth.³⁰ By the same token, Scriptural "infallibility" was distinguished from Scriptural "inerrancy," and both of these were found to be different from the "essential truth" of Scripture, which emerged despite its human authors and their many errors. To give these various positions a proper treatment would, however, take us far afield.

Seeking to apologize for the Bible in the face of modern scholarship's disturbing findings is, no doubt, a natural reaction. It derives, as was said earlier, from the desire of some scholars to "have their Bible and criticize it too." But if one considers biblical theology at some distance, what is striking is that, for the most part, modern scholarship has not led theologians to question the whole enterprise of speaking about the Bible as if it were a religiously authoritative document. Why not? After all, why should someone who, in his or her heart, feels that all the Bible's accounts of miraculous events are actually the result of primitive superstitions or delusions under stress or, still worse, conscious attempts to deceive – why should such a person nevertheless look to the authors of these very accounts as people who can offer valid insights into the nature of God or His ways with mankind? And how can someone who holds that much of biblical

²⁹ A crucial milestone: B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970)

³⁰ See the useful short survey by R. Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation, and the Canon of Scripture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 14-65. Among other treatments, I find particularly lucid P. J. Achtemeir, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), revised and expanded as *Inspiration and Authority: the Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), especially 28-63. For a thoughtful evangelical perspective on the question of inspiration: P. J. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

history was originally created as political propaganda, propaganda that consciously sought to conceal the seamy doings of extortionists, racketeers, and the engineers of political *Putsche* (not infrequently referring to God's role in the process!) – how can such a person nonetheless turn to this same history for teachings about divinely ordained morality and justice? Similar questions could be asked about the writings of other figures – prophets, sages, and psalmists – whose motives, historical circumstances, and formulaic rhetoric have also been investigated by modern scholarship. Ought these writings still to be considered a valid source of theological instruction *ex officio*? “The Bible is still the Bible” is the answer one hears, or “Listen for the word of God” – but why? By force of habit? Because there is no choice? This is a question not often addressed.

Literary Criticism of the Bible

Apologetics have also tinged another modern method of analyzing Scripture, today's “literary” approach to biblical texts. Unbeknownst to some of its current practitioners, this approach actually has deep roots, going back to antiquity and various early Christian thinkers.³¹ Indeed, the same approach to biblical texts was carried forward and developed on into the high Middle Ages. With the rise of modern scholarship, however, it went underground for a time: indeed, *Literarkritik* was used in German (and sometimes still is) to designate Wellhausenian source criticism, and in English “the Bible as Literature” was actually a kind of code-word for any scholarly, critical approach to the biblical text – it had nothing specifically literary about it.³² But the truly literary approach was never quite dead (witness Lowth and Herder) and, especially over the past half-century, self-consciously approaching biblical texts *as literature* had enjoyed a surprising comeback.

One reason for this comeback has been the literary approach's ability to neutralize some of the more noxious effects of modern scholarship. “We are not interested in the historical background of the text,” say the modern literary critics, “nor even whether it was written by one author or four. What matters is the finished product, the text itself. So, just as it doesn't matter to me what was happening in Wordsworth's life when he wrote

³¹ See on this my articles, “‘The Bible As Literature’ in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 11 (1983), 20-69 and “Some Medieval and Renaissance Writings on the Poetry of the Bible,” in I. Twersky, *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1979), 57-82. For these authors, there was no apparent conflict between what they saw as the Bible's use of tropes and figures or classical meters and the attribution of its authorship to the Holy Spirit. This attitude stands in contrast to that found in rabbinical writings of the same period. See my *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 96-170. Note also on this theme: Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49-96.

³² See on this my article, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1982), 217-36, and the subsequent exchange with Adele Berlin in *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), 323-32.

the *Lyrical Ballads* or whether the *Iliad* is the work of a single poet, I really don't care what lies behind the Bible. Like Wordsworth's poetry or the *Iliad*, the Bible is simply great literature – and this fact is not affected by what modern biblical scholars say about its origins and historical background or historicity.” With this approach,³³ all the troubling conclusions about composite authorship, editorial interpolations, and even “original meaning” can be put aside.³⁴ The modern literary critic is not against them in principle (and certainly not on theological grounds), it's just that they are basically irrelevant to someone whose focus is resolutely on the text we have in front of us today.

I should note – though it is hardly my main point here – that such an approach to an obviously multi-layered, multi-authored text is actually altogether at odds with what real literary critics seek to do. Confronted with the phenomenon of a text that has undergone editing by a foreign hand – say, Max Brod's editing of Kafka – the literary critic's first reaction is naturally to try to understand how the text got into its present form and what actually can be reasonably attributed to the author himself. The clearest *literary* example known to me of a kind of multiple authorship comparable to that attributed to the Pentateuch is the medieval French *Roman de la Rose*. This curious text was begun in the early thirteenth century by Guillaume de Lorris, an author enamored of medieval allegory. He produced a highly allegorical poem, with characters labeled “Happiness,” “Danger,” “Mirth,” and so forth, all interacting with one another in a symbolic bower of bliss. But de Lorris died before he could finish his work, and – for reasons not entirely clear – his pen was taken up by a second man, Jean de Meun, about forty years later. Then something extraordinary happened. Jean de Meun was not particularly taken by allegory, but he was quite interested in philosophy and high ideas, while at the same time

³³ It was basically, I. A. Richards' “New Criticism” *redivivus*.

³⁴ The hermeneutical side of this approach has been elaborated by various modern figures (again, see chapter 36 and notes). The biblical text is not (to use Saussure's terminology) the *sign* or *signifier* and the real events in Israel's history the *signified*, since such an approach utterly separates the things signified from the text itself – “The way we would say, for example, that an exit sign in a theater indicates the way to go but is not itself that way, nor part of that way. [But] according to [the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce], some signs... work this way, but verbal signs generally do not. Verbal signs do not merely point away from themselves, and they do not have merely one referent or object. Instead, he says, they are genuine representations, or *symbols*. This means that they are signs that refer to some object or referent only with respect to some mode of interpretation (or what he calls some *interpretant*, or interpreting agency or mind)... [Thus,] verbal signs normally have more than one possible referent and... a given mode of interpretation offers a means of distinguishing among a field of possible referents.” (P. Ochs, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity*, 12-13.) In these terms, interpretation involves three elements, signifier, signified, and interpretant. The *interpretant* of the Bible might thus be the approach of the “community of believers,” whose reading of the signified might be very different from that of a modern historian. By the same token, the interpretant might be the literary reader, who says the signified in the Bible is like the signified in *War and Peace* or *David Copperfield*. (The difficulty with this, of course, is that these novels claim to be novels, not an account of things that actually happened on earth three thousand years ago, things that, if they are simply viewed as fiction, lose some of their force as lessons about God's actual ways with humanity today. Even a book that seems to claim to be history, such as Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela* [1740] or *Clarissa* [1749], which present themselves as actual letters, are easily distinguished from the claim of biblical historians.)

a great storyteller, at times tender, at times a bit bawdy. If this sounds a bit Chaucer, perhaps it is no accident; Chaucer was a great admirer of Jean de Meun, and his style in English bears an uncanny resemblance to de Meun's medieval French. (Indeed, Chaucer is thought to be the, or a, translator of the *Roman* into Middle English.) Jean de Meun thus took up de Lorris' characters, but turned them from stick figures into real people, with their own emotions, obsessions, and other quirks of character. Despite the marked differences in the two authors' styles and approaches, the combined de Lorris-de Meun work circulated for a long as if a unified work. Once scholars became aware of its dual authorship, however, they reacted in a way exactly opposite to many literary critics of the Bible; they thought it as crucial to understand each author's work separately, in isolation, even if, at times, it was interesting as well to see how the later writer's creations echoed, took up the thread of, but also drastically modified the earlier writer's poem. In the end, it should be said, decent literary criticism is never concerned merely with the decorative, the "artistry" part of the text. It is about *meaning*, about making sense of a human artifact, and will hardly fly from any information that can make its understanding more profound.

It would be wrong to suggest that the popularity of the literary approach in recent years has come about solely for apologetic reasons. Certainly today's literary critics have often written in enlightening ways about the final form of the text. But what seems to me problematic about the literary approach is that it regularly ends up implying that that final form of the Bible is something that, in fact, it never was, *literature* in the same sense that the writings of Boccaccio or Goethe or Pushkin or Balzac are literature. As we have seen, there is no way to approach any text without some assumptions about what sort of a piece of writing it is (or, in literary jargon, what its genre is) and, consequently, what conventions it obeys and how it is to be understood. *There is no "default" position here*, no primary or "natural" way of reading from which all other ways are a deviation. I read a business letter one way and a poem another; I could go looking for rhyme or alliteration or even allegory in the warranty that came with my clock-radio, and, if the text is long enough, no doubt I could find them.³⁵ But this would still be completely inappropriate to the genre of clock-radio warranties. So even if I could wave my wand and forget about J, E, P, H and D, dismissing them as if they were a single author's preliminary drafts and focusing only on the book of Genesis as it now is, nevertheless, that would not turn it in to *literature* unless I were prepared to assume something about its genre that is largely inappropriate. Neither the original authors nor the final editors and canonizers of Genesis

³⁵ Something similar happened with finding rhyme in the Bible. See my "The Influence of Moses ibn Habib's *Darkhei No'am*" B. D. Cooperman, *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1983) 308-325.

were out to create *literature* of the Boccaccio kind; even to compare the stories of Genesis to their rewriting in *Paradise Lost* would be a bit off. In the beginning, most of Genesis was to be understood as a series of etiological explanations of the present, while for its canonizers Genesis was part of a great divine guidebook. Of course, any story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and any literary critic can therefore trace its humble or majestic “narrative poetics.” But doing so inevitably implies something about what the Bible is and why we read it that, on reflection, really isn’t true.³⁶

The literary approach holds a particular appeal for avowed secularists as well as the disillusioned consumers of modern biblical scholarship. “Despite all the things we don’t believe anymore,” they say, “there is still good reason for the Bible’s place of honor in our culture. It’s great literature!” This is not utterly false: the story of Joseph has a good plot; David is artfully limned. But from there to claiming that the Bible is Number One because of its literary qualities – puh-leeze! If its literary merit were the reason why we read it, surely the Good Book would have been swapped long ago for Dante and Shakespeare and Milton, Goethe and Dostoevsky and James Joyce. To compare the Bible’s artistic qualities to those of these authors is to compare the little tunes played on a shepherd’s pipe to the mighty sound of a symphony orchestra. Ultimately, this is just another form of apologetic, an attempt to save something special about Scripture in an unbelieving world.

Strange to tell, while many of today’s literary critics of the Bible are avowed secularists, their writings sometimes hold a particular appeal for people of rather conservative religious beliefs, Christians or Jews eager to celebrate the Bible’s merits. For them, its selling point lies not only in its capacity to push aside modern scholarship, but as well in its attribution to Scripture of a kind of artistry and design bordering on the miraculous, something that only “the great novelist in the Lord” (as Norman Mailer once put it) would be capable of composing. It might seem unfair to compare the appeal of this approach to that of a truly crackpot domain, the discovery of secret “codes” in the Bible that are held to have predicted various historical events.³⁷ What both have in common, however, is their ability to convince ordinary readers, at least those eager to be convinced, that there still is something special, indeed, something deeply hidden or infinitely complicated about the Bible that fully reflects its divine origins. So, religious

³⁶ I have argued this and related points in greater detail, and with a number of examples, in my “On the Bible and Literary Criticism”; my treatment of there here is therefore somewhat abbreviated. See also M. Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 14-20.

³⁷ Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Random House, 1998).

readers may be spotted in the admiring throng as literary critics offer up complicated diagrams showing the incredibly complex symmetry of the story of the Tower of Babel³⁸ or the Jacob cycle,³⁹ or the heretofore unnoticed repetition of a crucial thematic *Leitwort* (“key word”) in the Elijah-Elisha stories. (The diagrams are indeed symmetrical, but the texts themselves often less so;⁴⁰ the *Leitwort*, alas, often turns out to be “go,”⁴¹ “all,”⁴² “people”⁴³ or some other common term, which might be located with equal frequency in a paragraph of Samuelson’s *Economics*. Sad to say, one cannot escape the impression that beauty here is often solely in the eye of the pious beholder.)⁴⁴

³⁸ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 235.

³⁹ Perhaps the best known practitioner of this sort of criticism is J. P. Fokkelmann; see his *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1981); also *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991). But he is certainly not alone, nor is this approach limited to prose. The discoverers of infinitely complicated metrical schemes, symmetry, chiasmus, and the like have a distinguished pedigree (see my *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, esp. 204-251), but modern scholars (including Fokkelman *The Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis*) (Assen: van Gorcum, 1998) have not been outstripped. An example of the same approach in Israeli scholarship: Jacob Bazak *The Psalms in Sabbath Prayers: Their Thought and Meaning in the Light of their Geometrical Structure and Numerical Ornamentations* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1985).

⁴⁰ See on this the examination of such a diagram of Fokkelman’s in my “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts 1* (1981), 224-25, and the subsequent “Controversy,” my exchange with A. Berlin in *Prooftexts 2* (1982), 323-32.

⁴¹ A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 154.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³ M. Buber and Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), 262-64.

⁴⁴ Much of today’s literary criticism of the Bible is reminiscent of other literary criticism, particularly in regard to matters of technique or “poetics.” The operating assumption often seems to be that biblical authors, like more modern ones, are interested in showing how main characters change or evolve, that they like to construct their poems and narratives in ways that are symmetrical and pleasing to the eye, that they have a taste for irony, or even that their works are to be analyzed in terms of such Western genres as tragedy, comedy, or satire. Some of this may prove true here or there, but it ought hardly to be assumed. For example, there are very few poetic compositions in the Bible that might be said to have recognizable stanzas delineated by some refrain, although this form of poem was popular in ancient Greece and Rome and has remained a mainstay of Western literature ever since. One rare exception is Psalm 107, in which repeated lines do function as a sort of refrain. But at what intervals? Not, as one might expect, every four lines or every six, chopping the text into regular blocks, but only here and there, at lines 8, 15, 21, and 31, creating “stanzas” of 8, 7, 6, and 10 lines respectively? What does this say about the ancient Israelite love of symmetry? Why is it that, in biblical poetry, one often finds in place of exact repetition of a line or phrase – all poets supposedly love this device! – *inexact* repetition (compare, for example, Ps. 24:7 and 24:9, or Ps. 122:3 with Ps. 122:4)? These and many other particulars seem to support the notion that the whole idea of reading the Bible “as literature” must be preceded by a rigorous attempt to restore the “literary competence” of its readers. See on this my “On the Bible and Literary Criticism.” John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, also discusses the matter of literary competence and the impact of structuralist poetics; see pp. 8-19, 104-39, 180-97. Yet he seems somewhat divided on this issue, arguing at one point that the modern literary critic of the Bible is “simply clearing his mind of the prejudice (for it is no more) that ancient authors did not operate within conventions analogous to those of modern literature. Once the text is approached with an open mind, evidence of literary patterning, of skilful manipulation of theme and imagery, of dovetailing of disparate sources simply springs from the page” (53). But see below.

The View from Nowhere

Beyond all these is one more, somewhat less obvious, apologetic aspect to today's literary criticism of the Bible. Such criticism is quite often predicated on what, in another context, has been called "The View from Nowhere."⁴⁵ That is, today's literary critics offer highly sophisticated arguments about the subtleties of this or that part of the Bible, but if you were to ask them who it was who created the subtleties, they have no plausible answer to offer, since the aims and methods of these same biblical authors or redactors must be found elsewhere to be (at least if these critics are honest) quite at odds with the aims and methods implied by their literary analysis. So these wonderful literary subtleties just *are*; they came from nowhere at all. Let one example stand for many:

Numerous scholars have observed that the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) doesn't seem to belong in its present location. It interrupts the story of Joseph (which begins in Genesis 37 and then resumes in Genesis 39) and has no apparent connection to it. This notwithstanding, a few recent scholars have suggested that the story's insertion was not the act of a mindless redactor, but a deft move by someone who established, or at least saw, a number of subtle connections between the Joseph saga and the Judah-Tamar episode.⁴⁶ For example: Judah-Tamar begins with the statement that Judah "went down" from his brothers to Adullam, whereas Joseph is said to have been "taken down" (same verbal root, *yrd*) to Egypt; both stories feature the unusual phrase *haker-na* ("Recognize!" in Gen. 37:32 and 38:25); in both stories, "articles of attire" are used for deception – twice in the Joseph story (Joseph's ornamented coat is used to deceive Jacob, and his garment is used by Potiphar's wife to deceive) and once in Judah-Tamar (Tamar takes Judah's seal, cord, and staff to deceive him). On a deeper level, Judah's actions in Judah-Tamar are motivated by his fear of losing yet another son, just as Jacob is reluctant to send Benjamin down to Egypt because of *his* fear of losing another son (since he believes Joseph is dead). And both stories legitimate the emergence of a younger son's tribe as the leader of a kingdom.

This *is* an impressive set of correspondences, although some reservations are in order. To begin with, the highland country of Judah and Israel is precisely that, *high*; movement from it to somewhere else is thus inevitably described with the verbal root *yrd*, in dozens

⁴⁵ Borrowed from the title, and some of the argument, of Thomas Nagel's *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

⁴⁶ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 6-10; J. D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 157-62.

and dozens of other places quite unrelated to these two stories. As for *hakker-na* (“Recognize!”), *hakker* is the common biblical Hebrew word for “recognize,” and in both cases the verb is, more precisely, a summons to *reluctant* recognition; it is hardly surprising the same expression should be used in both. As for the deceptive use of “articles of attire,” this argument works only if one accepts the dubious premise that a seal, a cord, and a staff are indeed articles of attire. But none of these is my point here. Let us stipulate that these are indeed striking points of resemblance between the two stories. Who is responsible for them?

For ancient interpreters, this question had a ready answer: the divinely inspired author of the unitary book of Genesis. *Of course* such resemblances exist, they would say – the same person wrote every word of both and he, or at least God, obviously intended these connections. But this argument won’t work for modern scholars. For them the story of Judah and Tamar is evidently an etiological tale that circulated on its own before being inserted in its present location; its original author could have known nothing about where it would eventually end up in the Bible. Nor, by the same argument, could the original author of the Joseph story have known that the Judah-Tamar episode would end up being inserted in the middle of *his* narrative. If he had, he probably would not have been too happy about the idea, since, as virtually every commentator since late antiquity has noted, the Judah-Tamar tale interrupts the narrative flow and breaks the symmetry of the Joseph story. What is more, *its* Judah is something of an inconsiderate lout who is ultimately put to shame by his cleverer daughter-in-law, whereas the Judah of the Joseph story is its ultimate hero, the brother who willingly sacrifices himself rather than causing pain to his father. No, “Keep that tale separate from mine” is what the author of the Joseph story would have said. And certainly the awkwardness of its insertion – with nothing more than the introductory phrase “At that time...” – is not at all characteristic of the author of the Joseph narrative, universally recognized as the most skillful story-teller in Genesis.

Who, then, was responsible for the striking resemblances between the two stories? The only remaining candidate is the redactor, the person who did actually insert one story inside the other. Now, no one, I believe, is arguing that this redactor went so far as to change the text of one or both stories to make them fit together better – he didn’t, for example, insert the words “Recognize!” or “went down” in one or both, or change the plot of Judah-Tamar to make Judah, like Jacob in the Joseph story, worried about losing another son (what could the story have been before such a change?) No, the redactor changed nothing on his own, but his choice to insert the Judah-Tamar episode where he

did was nonetheless the decision of someone “who recognized both verbal and thematic affinities between the [two] stories.”⁴⁷

Did he really? This seems to me most unlikely. Everything scholars know about this redactor indicates that his highest priority was to preserve all surviving traditions about Israel’s ancestors and organize them into a single, chronologically ordered history, the book of Genesis; he did not care very much about the resulting subtle or not-so-subtle resemblances between one episode and the next in this history. He was not too troubled, for example, by the fact that his history had Abraham passing off Sarah as his sister twice in quite separate, but oddly similar, episodes (Genesis 12 and 20) and Isaac acting likewise in yet a third (Genesis 26). He didn’t seem to mind the numerous other doublets that modern scholars have catalogued – the double banishment of Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), the double naming of Beer Sheba (Genesis 21 and 26) or of Jacob (Genesis 32 and 35), and so on and so forth. Did he even notice that Cain – whose name, on the face of things, indicated that he was the ancestor of the Kenites – was, thanks to his (the redactor’s) placement of the story, to be killed off with all of his descendants in Noah’s flood, thus leaving the post-flood Kenites with no ancestry in his history? To say that the far less obvious connections between Judah-Tamar and the Joseph story had some role in this editor’s decision to incorporate the former story into the latter, and in the precise spot he did, strains all credibility.

Here is another, more simple-minded explanation. This editor was in possession of the story of Judah and Tamar and wished to include it (a valuable, if somewhat derogatory, glimpse of one of Israel’s patriarchs) in his great history. He couldn’t place it before the start of the Joseph story – the latter opens with Judah as still a young man, shepherding the family flocks like an obedient son, whereas in Judah-Tamar he is the father of grown children, indeed, a grandfather at the end of the story. Thus, one could hardly go from the Judah-Tamar episode to the *beginning* of the Joseph story. Nor could the redactor place Judah-Tamar at the end of the Joseph story, since at the end of that tale Judah and his brothers have taken up residence in Egypt, whereas Judah-Tamar requires Judah still to be resident of Canaan. The only choice was for the redactor to stick Judah-Tamar somewhere in the middle of the Joseph story, which he did, choosing a natural break in the narrative and appending to its beginning the rather lame transitional phrase, “At that time...”

⁴⁷ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 158.

If so, then who is responsible for all those marvelous points of connection between the two stories, “Recognize!” and “went down” and articles-of-clothing-used-to-deceive? When I was an undergraduate, such questions used to be ruled out of bounds: the literary text just *was*, and speculating about whether the author had actually intended this or that effect was called, in a famous essay by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.”⁴⁸ But that essay was itself fallacious, since it assumed that there was just one standard way of approaching a text, one set of assumptions that all readers brought to the act of reading. In the case of the Bible, as we have seen, the assumptions one brings to the text are crucial to its meaning. Ancient interpreters operated on the assumption that Genesis (along with the rest of the Bible) was the flawless product of divine inspiration, whereas modern interpreters generally assume that Genesis is an anthology riddled with doublets and other indications that its editor(s) cared little for consistency or subtle relationships among its constituent parts. Yet modern literary scholars of the Bible, though they usually act as if they belong to this second group, often disregard this assumption in presenting their literary analyses: no subtlety is too subtle and no finesse too fine for their close readings. That is to say, there is no crossover between what they assume elsewhere about *how* biblical authors and editors operated and the assumptions they bring to the act of reading this or that story; those assumptions are imported from their experience as critics of modern, Western literature. This is indeed the “View from Nowhere,” or more precisely, the confusion of two very different sets of assumptions.

Intentionally or otherwise, the literary approach has often ended up playing an apologetic role in the debate about the Bible – and it has also sometimes supported a basic confusion about the nature of biblical texts and their genre.⁴⁹ On reflection, it does not seem to offer any more help than the other apologetic tendencies surveyed.

⁴⁸ It is reprinted in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1954).

⁴⁹ The point was made long ago: “Rabbi Simeon said: Woe to him who regards the Torah as a book of mere tales and profane matters. If this were so, we ourselves might write a Torah nowadays that deals in such matters and [it might be] even more excellent. Indeed, in regard to earthly matters, the kings and princes of the world already possess materials of greater value. We could use them as a model for composing a Torah of this kind. But in reality the words of the Torah are higher words and higher mysteries...The tales of the Torah are only her outward clothing. If anyone thinks that the Torah itself is this clothing and nothing more, he might as well be dead. Such a person can have no share in the world to come. That is why David said, ‘Open my eyes so that I may behold wondrous things out of Your Torah’ [Ps. 119:18], namely, that which underlies the Torah’s outer clothing” (*Zohar* III, 152a, cited in G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* [New York: Schocken, 1969], 63–64). Note also the thoughtful remarks of James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 53–74.

Beyond Apologetics

The apologetic straddle is the direct result of trying to reconcile two conflicting agendas and sets of purposes. The modern scholar's agenda calls for studying biblical texts in their historical and cultural environment; the tradition of the Bible's divine character and its role in Bible-based religions have (or ought to have) no operational significance in this agenda – and indeed, these items are by and large not part of the discourse of biblical scholarship. On the other hand, theologians and many ordinary readers often approach the text with a commitment to having the Bible continue to occupy its traditional place in their religions. They want it still to be – in varying degrees, of course, and through different explicative strategies – a divinely given text that speaks to us today, and certainly one that is significantly different from other writings from the ancient Near East.⁵⁰ Either agenda, it seems to me, can be pursued independently; it is when they are combined that apologetics and “Biblical Criticism Lite” ensue.

I believe that, after a period of confusion on this matter throughout much of the twentieth century, a growing body of scholars has now come to understand that these two agendas are indeed incompatible. In writing *How to Read the Bible*, all I attempted to add to the current discussion was a detailed demonstration that this is the case and the assertion that, moreover, the Bible was *from the beginning* understood to mean something quite different from the apparent meaning of its various parts. This fact, exemplified in hundreds of specific interpretations, might, it seems to me, serve as a model for modern readers, encouraging them (again, in varying degrees and through different explicative strategies) to seek in the words of Scripture a message beyond that seen by the modern critical eye. But it is certainly not my ambition to prescribe a one-size-fits-all way of accomplishing this, nor – this should go without saying – do I wish to assert that the only alternative to the “original meaning” reading consists of those interpretations found in the writings of the ancient interpreters.

Yet I do think those interpretations are important. They are, as much as the words of the Bible itself, the common inheritance of all modern Christians and Jews, “the rock from which you were hewn, and the quarry from which you were dug.”

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⁵⁰ In my opinion, even literary critics of the Bible are caught between the same two conflicting programs; even if saving the Bible from the clutches of “excavative” scholarship (Alter) is not part of their announced aim, I think it would be naive to suppose that their own interest in the subject, or the interest of others in their work, is entirely divorced from the Bible's traditional role in Judaism and Christianity.

