

On the Development of Historical Criticism



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INTRODUCTION

The history of the development of historical criticism is important for evangelical scholars to know and understand for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that evangelical scholarship over the past two hundred years has spent no small amount of ink defending concepts such as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the divine inspiration of the Bible against historical criticism. Furthermore, the historical-grammatical method that grew from the Reformation ideal of *sola Scriptura* was birthed with the same goals of historical criticism—to understand the biblical text in its original context apart from the shackles of dogmatic exegesis that had often kept the Bible chained to somewhat fanciful interpretations since the days of the church fathers and into the Middle Ages. Each method of exegesis—historical-critical and historical-grammatical—grew from same ground. By understanding the development of the one we may come to understand the development and importance of the other. Finally, historical criticism is not going away. It has by now morphed into

several different manifestations,¹ but the basic, foundational presuppositions of critical exegesis of the Bible remain the same, making it imperative for evangelical scholars to return to its genesis that we might understand and critically engage its current expressions. This project will outline the growth and development of the historical critical method as it relates to Pentateuchal criticism beginning with the work of Baruch Spinoza and continuing to Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis. Of necessity, many scholars will be ignored, not because they lack importance, but because a treatment of this size must limit its scope. As this article is an historical survey, the bulk of critical interaction with the conclusions and presuppositions of historical criticism will be reserved until the end of the article, where suggestions will be offered for how we, as evangelicals and Southern Baptists who reject historical criticism as a methodology, should interact with historical criticism.²

THE PREHISTORY OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Charting the Course: Baruch Spinoza

“In our time, scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study.”³ Baruch Spinoza was a Spanish Jew who lived during the time of fierce Christian persecution of the Jews under Phillip II.⁴ This climate of fierce persecution, coupled with the influence of Epicurean philosophy, convinced Spinoza that religion had torn apart Europe and humans must therefore break free of it in order to be truly happy. This freedom from religion comes in the form of faith in science, which Spinoza thought would lead to religious tolerance and pluralism, and therefore,

¹ E.g., form criticism, source criticism, post-colonial criticism, liberation criticism, post-liberation criticism, feminist criticism, etc.

² Parties interested in a fuller treatment of the history of historical criticism should see *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III/1: The Nineteenth Century* (ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

³ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 35.

⁴ Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 33.

peace.⁵ In order to arrive at this “pure religion”—that which is reasonable and moral—that would allow human happiness, Spinoza “[d]etermined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines which I do not find clearly therein set down.”⁶ This involved the separation of “truth” from “meaning.” Spinoza argued that meaning was tied to the specific historical-cultural context of the original audience and is applicable *only* to the original audience. Truth was that which had universal significance. In order to arrive at truth rather than meaning, Spinoza outlined four principles of biblical interpretation.

First, Spinoza argued that the Bible must be treated as any other text, thus removing from it any vestiges of revelation. Second, the Bible must be divorced from its dogmatic history of interpretation in order that the Bible may be interpreted literally. However, Spinoza “identifie[d] literal interpretation with temporal and profane understanding.”⁷ Thus, literal interpretation entailed going behind the text to discover its true meaning when the text spoke “irrationally,” such as when it claimed that God had spoken. Related to Spinoza’s second principle is his insistence that the Hebrew people have an incredible disposition to attribute all things to God, which allowed him to “undermine the authority of scripture as revelation or even as record of revelation; for obviously at any point where a divine decree or action seemed irrational, it could be claimed that Hebrew idiom was responsible for its attribution to God.”⁸

Third, Spinoza argued that the “truth of Scripture is that which is recognizable to unaided human reason,” but the fourth principle states that only the educated elite are qualified to determine what is reasonable.⁹

Spinoza’s principles of biblical interpretation had profound impact on the development of historical criticism in the centuries to follow. Perhaps most significant was his argument that the Bible should be examined without recourse to its status as divine revelation. This move paved the way for later interpreters to investigate the *human* sources of the text, which ultimately led them to posit historical inaccuracies,

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

⁶ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (trans. R. H. M. Elwes; New York: Dover, 1951), 8.

⁷ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 41.

⁸ Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (2nd rev. ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

multiple authors, and various biases. Furthermore, Spinoza's view that biblical interpretation must be divorced from dogmatism allowed future interpreters to investigate biblical claims outside the church's purview.¹⁰ His separation of "meaning" and "truth" was significant because it highlighted the importance of interpreting the Bible within its historical-cultural context, but also because it allowed scholars to blame any supernatural occurrences on the cultural prejudices of the original authors and audience.¹¹ Finally, Spinoza's view of the superstitious Hebrew mindset laid the foundation for the "degenerative model of ancient Israelite history" that came to dominate biblical studies with the rise and eventual success of historical-critical exegesis.¹²

First Steps: Jean Astruc and Richard Simon

In 1753 Jean Astruc published his *Conjectures sur les Memoires Originaux Dont il paroît que Moÿse s'est servi pour composer le Livre de la Gènese: Avec des Remarques, qui appuient ou qui éclaircissent ces Conjectures*, a treatise that would change the landscape of not only Pentateuchal criticism, but biblical studies as a whole. In it, Astruc posited that if Moses did not experience what he wrote in Genesis (and he did not), then he must either have received it from divine revelation or had recourse to earlier sources. Since Moses did not directly appeal to divine revelation in the Pentateuch, then Astruc concluded that he must have used earlier sources, which Moses then divided into "smaller portions according to the incidents related in them," which he then compiled into Genesis.¹³ Astruc proposed four proofs for his theory that Moses used sources: "1. The repetition of the same occurrences; 2. The

¹⁰ Note that the Reformers also heralded this principle, albeit for different reasons and with different results.

¹¹ On the role of prejudice in interpretation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Garrett Barden & John Cumming; New York: Seabury, 1975), 235–74.

¹² Jon D. Levinson, "Theological Consensus or Historical Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies," in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?* (eds. Roger Brooks & John J. Collins; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 123. Quoted in Harrisville and Sundber, *Bible in Modern Culture*, 44.

¹³ Jean Astruc, *Conjectures sur le Gènese* (trans. P. Gibert; *Classiques de l'histoire des religions*; Paris: Noëse, 1991), 9. Quoted in Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 7.

alternation between Elohim and Jehovah . . . as names for God; 3. The omission of this alternation, generally speaking, in the rest of the Pentateuch from Ex. 3 onwards, where Moses is no longer dependent on tradition but is a witness to what he relates; 4. the anachronisms.”¹⁴ Using these four proofs, Astruc divided the Pentateuch into four columns: column A consisted of texts that use Elohim, column B consisted of texts that use Jehovah,¹⁵ column C consisted of texts that contain repetitions that do not use any name for God, and column D consisted of texts that Astruc believed did not belong to Israel’s history.¹⁶ In order to defend Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Astruc proposed that Moses compiled these four texts separately, intending them to be read as four distinct accounts. However, later scribes integrated them into a whole, thereby leaving Moses susceptible to the charges of “carelessness and inattention which even the most guarded commentators have laid at his door.”¹⁷

While Astruc wrote apologetically to defend Mosaic authorship, Richard Simon was not so kind toward Moses.¹⁸ In 1678 Simon published *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, in which he first used what would come to be known as the historical-critical method.¹⁹ Simon was not only the forerunner of modern historical criticism, but he was also the first scholar to suggest that behind the Pentateuch “there lay a long prehistory of distinct documents.”²⁰ In his treatise, Simon examines three areas of biblical scholarship.²¹ First, he tackled textual problems, not the least of which was Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, which Simon thought was well-nigh impossible. He also discerned apparent chronological discrepancies in the Old Testament, such as the disagreement in Genesis regarding whether Isaac was alive

¹⁴ Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli*, 8.

¹⁵ I am using Jehovah so as not to place “Yahweh” in Astruc’s writings anachronistically.

¹⁶ Jean Astruc, *Conjectures*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 438.

¹⁸ Cf., Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli*, 11.

¹⁹ Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (Paris: Billaine, 1678). For a modern edition see *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (ed. P. Gibert; Paris: Bayard, 2008).

²⁰ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 240.

²¹ See M. A. Fahey, “Simon, Richard (1638–1712),” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. Kim; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 915. See also M. A. Fahey, “Richard Simon, Biblical Exegete (1638–1712),” *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 99 (1963): 236–47.

or dead when Joseph was sold into slavery.²² Second, Simon mocked his contemporaries for their lack of “critical acumen” when examining the biblical text. Third, Simon outlined several rules for interpretation that were to be followed in order to arrive at the appropriate interpretation of a given text: 1) Mosaic authorship was to be abandoned. Instead, groups of scribes composed the majority of the Pentateuch through reliance on an oral tradition. 2) Simon modified the dominant view of biblical inspiration to argue against the idea that God dictated each word of Scripture. Similarly, inspiration did not exclude the use of literary genres in use at the time of composition. 3) Simon denied the historicity of many parts of the Bible, arguing instead that they were “poetic descriptions” of God’s work in the world.²³

Richard Simon’s work is important first of all because he furthered the work of Baruch Spinoza in regards to historical criticism. Whereas Spinoza made it possible to examine the Bible as a human book, Simon took this further by interpreting the Bible critically. Most importantly, his denial of Mosaic authorship in favor of scribal schools anticipated the source criticism that would reach its height a few centuries later. His denial of the historicity of some portions of the Bible also paved the way for the work of scholars such as de Wette and Wellhausen who would roundly deny the historicity of Chronicles, thus denigrating its value for developing a chronology of the Pentateuch. Finally, Simon’s discussion of the doctrine of inspiration has been influential in evangelical scholarship as well as critical scholarship, for it opened the way to examine the Bible within its distinct literary genres.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN FULL SWING

Scholars such as Spinoza, Astruc, and Simon laid the foundation for nineteenth century scholarship to develop historical criticism more fully. As in the previous section, our primary focus here is on Pentateuchal criticism because the Pentateuch “has generally served as the staging ground for many if not most of the critical questions and methods that later spread to other areas of the biblical literature.”²⁴

²² Simon, *Histoire critique*, 136–7. Cited in Jean Louis Ska, “The ‘History of Israel’: Its Emergence as an Independent Discipline,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III/1: The Nineteenth Century* (ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 321.

²³ Fahey, “Simon, Richard,” 915.

²⁴ Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker, *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress/Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 263.

Wilhelm de Wette

With his sixteen-page dissertation, de Wette did what all budding scholars hope to do: change the face of their discipline.²⁵ In it, he argued that Moses did not author the Pentateuch, which was in fact the product of multiple authors. De Wette posited two authors for Genesis, and several more for the rest of the Pentateuch. He also argued that Deuteronomy must have been a later invention because its spirituality corresponds more closely to Judaism.²⁶ It was only in a footnote that he mentioned that the book discovered by Josiah in 622 B.C. was perhaps Deuteronomy, a theory that would become “standard fare” in due time.²⁷ In his later work, de Wette developed the implications of his dissertation.

His *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament*²⁸ pitted Chronicles against Samuel/Kings, arguing that Chronicles presents a religion that is Mosiac and Levitical while Samuel/Kings does not.²⁹ In de Wette’s view, Chronicles displayed prejudice toward supernatural events and matters related to Levites, thus indicating the author’s desire to retrieve “the honor of the Jewish cultus.”³⁰ These concerns are absent in Samuel/Kings, which records multi-site worship and a religion that is devoid of the type of ritual found in later Judaism. Furthermore, de Wette argued that the religion portrayed in the Pentateuch does not appear outside of the Pentateuch again until Ezra-Nehemiah. De Wette makes much of Josiah’s discovery of the law book in 2 Kgs 22, stating “that until Josiah, there is no trace of the existence of the Pentateuch. Thereafter, especially in the Exile, there are the most frequent and

²⁵ Mark Gignilliat states, “Within this work, the seeds of critical insight were sown that would eventually shape Pentateuchal studies . . .” (*A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], 44).

²⁶ See H. Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century* (trans. Leo G. Perdue; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 233.

²⁷ Gignilliat, *Brief History*, 44.

²⁸ Wilhem Martin Leberecht de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (2 vols.; Halle: Schimmelpfennig, 1805–1807).

²⁹ See Reventlow, *History*, 234–5.

³⁰ De Wette, *Beiträge*, 1:102. Quoted in Reventlow, *History*, 235.

definite traces.”³¹ Based on the Levitical and Mosaic emphases of Chronicles, de Wette concluded that Chronicles was a fictive account that projected Deuteronomic ideals onto early Israelite history. Having devalued the historicity of Chronicles, de Wette was now free to re-date the law portions of the Pentateuch, which—for him—reflect the same period as Chronicles, that is, the monarchy.³²

In his *Beiträge*, de Wette also distinguished sharply between myth and history, arguing that the purpose of the historian is to interpret the historical record in order to learn something of its contributors. Thus, the biblical accounts only tell us about the historical-cultural context *at their time of composition*. The implication of de Wette’s view of history-writing is that the Pentateuch is valuable for understanding the history of Israel’s religion in that it describes the religion of those who wrote the Pentateuch, but it “is rather useless as a source of history, or, rather does not exist as such.”³³

Heinrich Ewald

Heinrich Ewald’s *History of Israel* was the first critical history of Israel to be written.³⁴ Ewald’s stated purpose was “To describe this history . . . as far as it can be known in all its discoverable remains and traces . . .”³⁵ Ultimately, Ewald sought to write a history of Israel that would offer an alternative view to the “hyper-critical attitude of de Wette,” for the former held to the truthfulness of Scripture.³⁶ However, for Ewald, “truthfulness” had to be qualified, for “[t]radition has its roots in actual facts; yet it is not absolute history, but has a peculiar character and a value of its own.”³⁷ The task of the historian is therefore to separate out the “historical kernel” that is imbedded deep within the tradition (*Sage*) found in the biblical text. For Ewald, this historical kernel could be found within “songs, proverbs, proper names,

³¹ De, *Beiträge*, 1:184–5. Cited in John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 31.

³² See Reventlow, *History*, 234–6.

³³ De Wette, *Beiträge*, 2:398.

³⁴ Heinrich Ewald, *Einleitung in die Geschichte des Volke Israel* (8 vols.; Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1843–1859, 1864–1868); ET: *History of Israel* (8 vols.; ed. R. Martineau; London: Longman & Green, 1876–1886).

³⁵ Ska, “The ‘History of Israel,’” 330.

³⁶ Ewald, *History*, I:7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I:44.

monuments, and institutions.”³⁸ As opposed to de Wette and later Wellhausen, Ewald argued that though the historical narratives were revised at a later date, they still contribute something about both the time in which they were written and the time to which they refer.

Ewald’s *History* divides the Bible into three works: the Great Book of Origins (Genesis–Joshua), the Great Book of Kings (Judges–Kings), and Great Book of Universal History Down to the Greek Times (Chronicles–Nehemiah). He argues that the Pentateuch could have had up to five separate authors, each of whom “completed and supplemented” the others’ work.³⁹ With this, Ewald introduced the Supplementary Hypothesis for the composition of the Pentateuch, his other significant achievement in the development of historical criticism.⁴⁰ Ewald further argued that the Patriarchs were “ideal types” who must have actually lived at some point, but he also affirmed that “If we look simply at the prevailing character and representation of this period given in the most ancient sources, we shall find little that is really historical to say of the three Patriarchs.”⁴¹ Regarding the “Great Book of Kings,” Ewald argued that it consisted of monarchical documents that were later compiled by an exilic, Deuteronomistic editor—who also added Joshua—as an apology for why the people of Israel were suffering exile.⁴²

Karl Heinrich Graf

“Of the trio of scholars who laid the foundation for modern source criticism, Graf was the initiator and first proponent; Kuenen the defender and detailed explicator; and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1914) the one who took the ideas and applied them to a fully articulated

³⁸ Ska, “The ‘History of Israel.’” Cf. Ewald, *History*, 18–22.

³⁹ Ska, “History of Israel,” 335.

⁴⁰ See Thomas Römer, “‘Higher Criticism’: The Historical and Literary-critical Approach—With Special Reference to the Pentateuch,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III/1: The Nineteenth Century* (ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 411. However, see R. J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf* (VTSup 19; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 29. Thompson argues that Ewald developed a hybrid Supplementary/Documentary Hypothesis, quoting Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon, 1968), 108–109.

⁴¹ Ewald, *History*, 1:290.

⁴² Cf. Römer, “Higher Criticism,” 415.

history of Israelite religion . . .”⁴³ Along with laying the foundation for source criticism, Graf was instrumental in the development of historical criticism because in his *Die geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments* he denied the unity of the *Grundschrift*, the document that until Graf had been thought to form the primary material in the Pentateuch.⁴⁴ Graf posited that the narrative and legal material within the *Grundschrift* came from two different sources “and argued that its legislation was *later* than that of the book of Deuteronomy.”⁴⁵ Though Graf later brought the narrative and legal sections back together, he “essentially proclaimed the legal material to be the linchpin for the dating of the sources, leaving the narrative material to the side.”⁴⁶

After denying the unity of the *Grundschrift*, Graf developed his second main contribution to historical criticism: he argued that the Deuteronomist combined the narrative of the *Grundschrift* with J and Deuteronomy. As noted above, scholars thought that it was not until after the exile that the priestly material was added to the Pentateuch.⁴⁷ This is crucial because scholars now looked *only* to the legal material as a valid method for dating the Pentateuchal sources, which confirmed critical suspicions that the Pentateuch was a monarchical (at least) projection onto a much earlier period in Israelite history. Furthermore, Graf’s hypothesis “laid the groundwork for the eventual combination of J and E into one narrative document, known by the siglum ‘JE’ or the name ‘Jehovist.’”⁴⁸ From this time it was simply taken as a given that “JE” was a unified source that was to be treated together.

Abraham Keunen

Though Abraham Kuenen sharply criticized Graf for dividing the *Grundschrift*, he developed, clarified, and popularized Graf’s theory. Until Graf and Kuenen, Pentateuchal material was dated according to the “contradictions” and doublets found within the narrative material. After them, it was dated according to the priestly legislation.⁴⁹ Indeed, Kuenen was so convincing in his arguments that in 1886 he could boast

⁴³ Joel Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (FAT 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 27.

⁴⁴ Karl Heinrich Graf, *Die geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments: Zwei historisch-kritische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: T. O. Weigel, 1886).

⁴⁵ Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 258.

⁴⁶ Baden, *Redaction*, 23.

⁴⁷ Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 258.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ Baden, *Redaction*, 24.

regarding historical-critical readings of the Pentateuch that "...I am no longer advocating a heresy, but am expounding the received view of European critical scholarship."⁵⁰ Kuenen also argued that much of the legal material within the so-called Hexateuch was *later* than Deuteronomy and that the author of Deuteronomy did not redact the Hexateuch. Rather, the redaction followed along the lines of the *Grundschrift*.⁵¹ Ultimately, Kuenen's primary importance, apart from his popularization of Graf's work, was his insistence that "[t]he borderline between the *writing* and the *editing* of the Hexateuch exists only in our imagination. The latest writers were at the same time redactors, and vice versa. The further we advance in the critical investigation, the more the extent of what Popper called *the ongoing diaskeue* emerges."⁵² The importance of this statement lies in the fact that Kuenen demonstrated the impossibility of working out the distinction between redactors and authors. This observation may lead one to wonder whether the entire enterprise of searching for separate authors within the Pentateuch is bankrupt, yet Kuenen steadfastly held onto to the Supplementary Hypothesis in spite of confidence in the inability to distinguish between authors and editors within the Pentateuchal material.

Julius Wellhausen

The previous scholars examined each made smooth the way for Julius Wellhausen, perhaps the most influential Old Testament scholar of the entire modern period. Wellhausen is most closely associated with the Documentary Hypothesis, which he adopted and adapted from the likes of Graf, Kuenen, and de Wette, among others. The "novelty" and genius of Wellhausen, however, lay in his use of source criticism to reconstruct a history of Israel.⁵³ In his view, once the historical context of the individual sources were determined, they could then be used to develop a genuine history of Israel for the sources reflected the views

⁵⁰ Abraham Kuenen, *An Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin and Composition of the Pentateuch* (trans. Phillip H. Wicksteed; London: MacMillan, 1886), lx.

⁵¹ Rudolf Smend, "The Work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III/1: The Nineteenth Century* (ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 431.

⁵² Abraham Kuenen, *ThT* 14 (1880): 281. Cited in Smend, "The Work," 432-3.

⁵³ Smend, "The Work," 450.

dominant at their time of writing, not the views of the Israelites at the time that the events allegedly occurred.⁵⁴

Wellhausen's most influential work was his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, in which he laid out his view of Israel's history.⁵⁵ In *Prolegomena*, Wellhausen makes a sharp distinction between Israel and Judaism. Israel had no law and therefore represented a pure religion that was devoid of ritualism and false worship. Judaism, on the other hand, had a fully-developed law, which accounted for its ritualistic, lifeless worship.⁵⁶ In order to arrive at this conclusion, Wellhausen asked the question, "Where should the law of Moses be located in Israel's history?"⁵⁷ Since Wellhausen approached the text from the philosophical presupposition that religion becomes more complex over time, he had to posit that Mosaic law belonged at a much later date in Israel's history than the biblical text indicated.

The centralization of the cult became a major tenet in his reconstruction of Israel's history, for it provided important evidence regarding the development of Israel's religion over time. Wellhausen observed tension between cultic centralization and the proliferation of "high places" up until the time of Solomon, after which the kings received criticism if they did not tear down the non-Jerusalemite worship sites. Wellhausen therefore posited that Mosaic Law, which precluded multi-site worship, must have been a later development in Israel's history that was subsequently projected onto the earlier part of its history through the editing of the Pentateuch. Wellhausen posited that of the four sources, JE demonstrated no concern with centralization, D initiated centralization, and P finalized it, such that "Priestly material is retrofitted to the time of Moses in its canonical presentation, though, in fact, it is from the postexilic period."⁵⁸

Apart from cultic centralization, Wellhausen also examined the sacrifices, feasts, priests and Levites, and clergy, each of which "reveal[s] the same historical development of Israel's religion as observed in the move to centralize the cult and further support his historical reconstruction."⁵⁹

The lasting legacy of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* is his historiographical use of source criticism to write a critical history of

⁵⁴ Gignilliat, *Brief History*, 63.

⁵⁵ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Scholars Press Reprints and Translations; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994 [1878]).

⁵⁶ Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli*, 95–96.

⁵⁷ Gignilliat, *Brief History*, 67.

⁵⁸ Gignilliat, *Brief History*, 68–69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

Israel. His treatment of the Documentary Hypothesis was—obviously—its most convincing exposition thus far and quickly became the standard critical view. After Wellhausen, scholars simply took for granted that the Pentateuch had been composed of at least four sources and that the legislative material came from a period much later in Israel's history than the narrative sections. Furthermore, Wellhausen essentially flip-flopped the traditional understanding of the relationship between the Law and the Prophets. After his work, the traditional view that the prophets read, interpreted, and expounded upon Mosaic Law was defunct. Rather, it became “common knowledge” that “[i]t is an empty illusion that the prophets would have explained and interpreted the law.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, Wellhausen's dichotomy between Israel and Judaism became increasingly popular and would influence the Christian view of Judaism and the Old Testament for many years to come: “With the appearance of the law came to an end the old freedom, not only in the sphere of worship, now restricted to Jerusalem, but in the sphere of religious spirit as well. There was now in existence an authority as objective as could be; and this was the death of prophecy.”⁶¹

Volumes upon volumes have been written on each of the scholars examined here, and this treatment in no way pretends to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the brief sketches of these founding fathers of historical criticism will shed some light on the current state of critical scholarship today and its importance for evangelical biblical scholarship. We turn now to what is perhaps most important for understanding how to engage critical scholarship: the philosophical presuppositions that undergird it.

PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS AND INFLUENCES ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALISM

Perhaps the most important influence in the development of historical criticism is Enlightenment Rationalism. This philosophical worldview allowed interpreters for the first time to view the Bible as a strictly human book, removing from it any vestiges of divine revelation. We can see this trend clearly in Spinoza, whose “rationalism leaves no room for any traditional concept of revelation, and his determinism denies the possibility of any special acts of God in history. Human

⁶⁰ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 398.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 402.

reason is the only reliable source of truth; the Bible is simply a collection of fables and fantastic stories that the simple can use to nourish their faith and obedience.”⁶² Rationalism effectively freed interpreters from reading the Bible within the confines of the church’s traditional hermeneutical principles. Rather than working from the presupposition that God had inspired the biblical text, Rationalism allowed them to work from the presupposition that the Bible was just like any other book, which allowed them to apply the same hermeneutical principles to the Bible as would be applied to any other text.

Rationalism also posited that “[r]eason is a human faculty which is adapted to the natural environment,” a view that led to the removal of sin from human affairs.⁶³ That is, it was no longer held as truth that human sinfulness could corrupt the mind; instead, reason was thought to be able to rise above environmental factors in order to understand anything that was reasonable and rational. This certainly included the universe, for Rationalism held that it was constructed “according . . . [to] scientific laws” which are understandable and immutable.⁶⁴ Miracles were thought to be impossible because they would overrule the universal laws that govern the universe. Finally, Rationalism urged interpreters to purify the Bible from all “irrational and immoral elements,” which, of course, were determined by the application of rationalistic principles to the text.⁶⁵

Apart from the devaluation of revelation and the presupposition of the Bible’s origins, Rationalism also caused interpreters to apply modern historiographical principles to the Bible. This result of Rationalism does not fully blossom until the work of de Wette and Wellhausen, but its roots lie in the insistence that the Bible be subjected to the same standards as all other historical works. Furthermore, Richard Simon’s move to interpret the Bible within the confines of its distinct genres impacted the way later interpreters read the historical books, such as Chronicles, leading them to subject ancient history writing to the same standards as modern history writing. Even in this, though, the presupposition that the Bible was a human book—and therefore fallible—was a driving factor.

⁶²Daniel Boerman, “The Significance of Spinoza for Biblical Interpretation,” *ResQ* 51 (2009): 101.

⁶³Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 251–2.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 252.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 253.

HEGELIAN DIALECTIC AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

The Hegelian dialectic, in its simplest form, posits a thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of evolutionary development, whereby the antithesis is a sharp reaction against a particular thesis, and the synthesis is the outworking of the combination of the thesis and antithesis. Furthermore, this theory is fundamentally evolutionary: complexity increases over time. An idea in its simplest form—the thesis—comes first, followed by increasing complexity until resolution is reached in the synthesis. This philosophy can be seen clearly in historical criticism: Thompson points out that Wellhausen openly cites Vatke, who “was certainly a Hegelian,” as having profound influence on his work.⁶⁶ Thus, it is no surprise to find Hegelianism in Wellhausen’s division of Israel’s history into three periods: Ancient Israel, Prophetic Reformation, and Restoration.⁶⁷ However, Thompson is perhaps correct in arguing that “at most it is in forms of expression rather than in basic principles that Hegelianism influenced Grafianism.”⁶⁸ In the Hegelian system, the synthesis is considered the highest achievement, but for Wellhausen Ancient Israel marked the high point of Israelite religion for it was unencumbered by the Law. Wellhausen here displays the evolutionary presupposition that religion becomes more complex over time, and therefore the Law—a complex system—must be a later projection onto Israel’s early history, therefore upending the biblical account of God’s revelation in the Old Testament. Finally, Wellhausen’s valuation of “early” Israelite religion exposes his Romanticism.⁶⁹

ROMANTICISM

The influence of Romanticism is most obvious in the beginning stages of historical criticism, whose early proponents were heavily influenced by Herder.⁷⁰ It was also influential in the History of Religions School, as evidenced by its use of the Bible to understand the religion of Israel as a human construct. As Gignilliat states, “[t]he Romantics have to look for ‘religion’ in something other than revelation; it will now be found in the humanities in general or in the course of traceable human

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁷ See Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: Reimer, 1894).

⁶⁸ Thompson, *Moses and the Law*, 41.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

history with all its *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress).⁷¹ Romanticism is therefore an important concept for historical criticism because it caused early historical critics who had eschewed revelatory religion to search for religion elsewhere. As Thompson indicates, vestiges of Romanticism also likely account for Wellhausen's infatuation with the earlier, "pure" religion of Israel as opposed to the later, "legalistic" religion of Judaism.⁷²

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Understanding these philosophical presuppositions is crucial to understanding and engaging with historical critical scholarship today. Rationalism—and the anti-supernatural bias that accompanies it—accounts for the most significant disagreements that evangelicals have with critical scholars. Disbelief in the supernatural, and the concomitant elevation of human reason, undergirded critical scholarship from its inception, and remains a driving force in how critical scholars interpret the Bible today. Furthermore, the evolutionary presupposition that complexity increases over time led early critical scholars to discount the biblical account of God's revelation in the Old Testament, a sentiment still held today. Though the Bible presents a complex religious system in the Pentateuch, critical scholars argue that such complexity could not have been reached at such an early point in Israel's history. The result of these two factors—Rationalism and Hegelian Dialectic—was a biblical religion devoid of revelation, and therefore value, which has unfortunately led many to search for a meaningful relationship with God outside of the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Why study the history of historical criticism? Should not evangelical scholars simply concern themselves with the Bible? Yes and no. Yes, because we are a biblical people who hold that the Bible is God's inspired and inerrant word. No, because we also are an evangelistic people who will encounter historical criticism in our ministries. First and foremost our motivation is tied to the call to engage an ever-

⁷¹ Gignilliat, *Brief History*, 87.

⁷² Thompson, *Moses and the Law*, 45.

growing skeptical and post-Christian culture with the truth of Scripture. The people to whom we witness and minister will have been exposed to critical theories of the Bible. Whether it be from The History Channel, Newsweek, or some other source, our mission field is inundated with a false understanding of the Bible. We would do well to be able to interact with historical criticism if for no other reason than that. For too long Christians have retreated from the challenges presented by critical scholarship, and thereby we have allowed many “discussions” to become monologues.

Furthermore, Evangelicalism and historical criticism share similar values, though they usually disagree on how to interpret the biblical evidence itself. Like evangelicals, critical scholars—both previous and current—want to understand the meaning of biblical texts in their original context. They value the original historical-cultural context of the Bible and seek to understand how it influences the meaning of the text. Historical critics also read the Bible closely, and much to the surprise of some evangelicals, take the biblical text seriously. The fruits of historical criticism—source criticism, form criticism, and so many other criticisms—have given new insight into the Bible. Like evangelicals, historical critics are dissatisfied with allegorization and moralization, wanting instead to know how the text’s original audience read and understood it. Thus, even though evangelicals disagree with how critical scholars read the Bible, we may still at times learn from their careful scrutiny of the text.

Despite the similar interests of both historical criticism and evangelical scholarship, there are significant presuppositional disagreements that lead to widely divergent interpretive decisions. Therefore, understanding the history and development of historical criticism will enable thoughtful interaction with the discipline of historical criticism as opposed to either a knee-jerk reaction against it or a naïve embracement of it. Furthermore, understanding the historical-cultural context that gave rise to historical criticism exposes the philosophical presuppositions that underlie many of its unorthodox and anti-supernatural interpretive decisions. As evangelicals seek to engage the world for Christ, we cannot turn a blind eye to critical interpretive strategies; instead, we must confront them head-on. Basic knowledge of the key figures, development, and presuppositions of historical criticism will enable us to do that in a Christ-glorying manner.