



CHAPTER 1

GETTING TO THE ROOTS OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

It is commonplace to see the historical-critical method described as an objective or neutral method. In his discussion of the roots of historical criticism, John Barton explains that “historical criticism was meant to be value-neutral, or disinterested. It tried, so far as possible, to approach the text without prejudice, and to ask not what it meant ‘for me,’ but simply what it meant. . . . The historical critic’s calling was to be a neutral observer, prescinding from any kind of faith-commitment in order to get at the truth.”¹

It is one thing to make the standard acknowledgment that such an ideal can never be fully attained. It is important to take the next step and note that many scholars assert that such objectivity was rarely the stated goal of real historical critics. For example, James Barr asks the pointed question “But where are these claims to be value-neutral and value-free?” and then proceeds to use Julius Wellhausen as a case in point, showing how Wellhausen’s work was not an attempt to be objective or neutral.²

Yet Wellhausen himself clearly argued that biblical criticism was independent and prior to philosophical commitments. For example, he wrote, “Biblical criticism, however, did not in general develop under the influence of philosophical ideas. . . . Philosophy does not precede, but follows. . . .”³

Which is it, then? A neutral, objective method, or a method largely defined by some prior philosophical commitment (a commitment that can and should be the subject of critical analysis)? We argue that it is the latter, and we hope that our account of the history of historical criticism’s roots will clarify the philosophical

1 John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 203–204. See also Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007), p. 3, where Barton even uses a mathematical analogy to describe his own argument: “Rather like a mathematician covering many pages with calculations in order to show that a theorem is in fact self-evident, I shall have to spend a great deal of detailed discussion to show that such an apparently banal conclusion [that biblical criticism comes down to attention to the plain meaning of the biblical text] holds. . . .” In Barton’s defense, although he sees biblical criticism as a method which is in some way objective, he recognizes limits to this objectivity, and especially in the way in which the method has been practiced (p. 6).

2 James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 48.

3 Quoted in Craig G. Bartholomew, “Uncharted Waters: Philosophy, Theology and the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation,” in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller, eds., *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 17.

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and (even more important) political commitments inherent in the core foundations of the method itself.

That is the task of this present volume. But before taking up that task, since we are proposing a different account of the history of the historical-critical method, we must first offer a word about the current status of the history of biblical scholarship. We do not wish to burden the reader with a long account of the many histories of scriptural scholarship, but some attention will help situate our book and make clear its particular contribution. There are many such histories; we focus briefly on just a few.

Werner Kümmel's *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* remains an important overview of the development of the historical-critical method.⁴ He sets the real origin of the modern historical-critical approach well into the eighteenth century. As he says, "Scientific study of the New Testament is indebted to two men, Johann Salomo Semler and Johann David Michaelis, for the first evidences of a consciously historical approach to the New Testament as a historical entity distinct from the Old Testament."⁵ Of course Kümmel realizes that earlier figures had prepared the way for Semler and Michaelis, and so he devotes two chapters to important predecessors, in which (affirming Theodore Zahn's assessment) he denotes Richard Simon as "the founder of the science of New Testament introduction."⁶ He also notes the importance of "English Deism and Its Early Consequences," covering such key figures as John Locke, John Toland, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Chubb, Thomas Morgan, and others, but goes into very little detail.⁷ Amazingly, he fails even to mention Thomas Hobbes or Benedict Spinoza, both of whom are elsewhere credited with being, in their own ways, founders of the modern historical-critical approach to Scripture, and whose efforts predate Semler's and Michaelis's by about a century.⁸

The very first sentence of volume I, chapter 1 of William Baird's *History of New Testament Research* is "The critical study of the Bible began in the eighteenth century."⁹ Baird's history is a fine, two-volume study, but one that needs to be supplemented by a close analysis of important earlier works. He does provide a quick sweep over the Renaissance, Reformation, and early Enlightenment, giving several pages to Richard Simon, of whom he also notes, "If any individual can be named as the founder of modern biblical criticism, that person would have to be Richard Simon."¹⁰ But Baird passes completely over Spinoza, even though Spinoza's arguments provided a significant part of the context for Simon's work. Moreover, Baird fails even to mention Hobbes, whose efforts predate Spinoza's. While Baird rightly attends to English

4 Werner Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, translated by S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972).

5 Kümmel, *The New Testament*, III.1, p. 62.

6 Ibid., II.1, p. 41.

7 Ibid., II.2.

8 This is already noted, for example, in Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1956), p. 57.

9 William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Vol. I: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 3.

10 Ibid., p. 17.

Deism—focusing on such figures as Locke and Toland¹¹—only a few pages are given to each as background figures for the real critical approach to the Bible that begins in earnest in the mid-eighteenth century.

Much the same is true for Rudolph Smend's *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries*.¹² While a fine study, it begins with Jean Astruc, famous for having differentiated the divine names in Genesis and using them for discerning distinct literary sources. Smend thereby leaves the reader with very little indication of intellectual predecessors, and hence gives the impression that the roots of modern biblical scholarship reach back only to the mid-eighteenth century.

Our analysis ends where these studies begin. We commence in the early fourteenth century with Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham; move through John Wycliffe, Niccolò Machiavelli, Martin Luther, Henry VIII and the English Reformation; consider the philosophical revolution of Descartes; and conclude with the earliest acknowledged fathers of modern biblical criticism—Hobbes, Spinoza, and Simon. We treat each of them in much more detail than is almost invariably the case with those surveys that hurry through the fathers of the historical-critical method in order to discuss their more famous sons in the latter half of the eighteenth century, or the heyday for modern biblical criticism in nineteenth-century Germany. In extending the story back to the later Middle Ages, we hope to get a deeper and clearer understanding of the “fathers,” and hence, of the patrimony they bequeathed to the great biblical critics of the latter eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries such as Semler, Michaelis, W.M.L. de Wette, Hermann Reimarus, Johann Griesbach, Johann Eichhorn, Friedrich Schleiermacher, D. F. Strauss, F. C. Baur, Johannes Weiss, Heinrich Ewald, Bruno Bauer, Julius Wellhausen, Rudolph Bultmann, and Hermann Gunkel.

As several newer studies show, we are (thankfully) not alone in our desire to illuminate more fully the centuries leading up to the Enlightenment. Henning Graf Reventlow has been something of a pioneer in shifting the focus from nineteenth century Germany to much earlier developments. James Barr, in his foreword to Reventlow's *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*,¹³ has likewise noted the deficiencies of most historical overviews, asserting (with Reventlow) that

modern histories of biblical scholarship, in so far as they give any attention at all to the period of English Deism and early biblical criticism, have done so

11 As well as Matthew Tindal, Anthony Collins, Thomas Woolston, Peter Annet, Thomas Morgan, and Thomas Chubb. *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

12 Rudolph Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

13 Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). The original German title gives a much better “picture” of Reventlow's argument: *Biblical Authority and the Spirit of Modernity: The Significance of the Biblical Understanding for the Intellectual History and Political Development in England from the Reformation to the Enlightenment (Bibelautorität und Geist der Moderne, Die bedeutung des Bibelverständnisses für die geistesgeschichtliche und politische Entwicklung in England von der Reformation bis zur Aufklärung)*.

only tangentially: they have noted here and there various points at which these early days showed an anticipation of later critical ideas or results. But on the whole they have not tried to enter into the profounder setting in life in which these new ideas came to birth: the reasons why new questions were asked, the nature of the problems which were encountered, the concerns which animated the scholars as they thought and wrote.¹⁴

Recovering the deepest roots of the historical-critical method is, for Reventlow, necessary precisely because of the “considerable decline in the significance of biblical study with the general framework of Protestant theology as it is practiced in universities and church colleges and as it affects the work of local church communities.” The decline is in part caused by the “failure of exegetes to reflect adequately on their methodology and the presuppositions, shaped by their view of the world, which they bring to their work.”¹⁵ Reventlow regards it as ironic (given the critical and historical focus on the Bible by contemporary scholars) that “Reflection on the presuppositions of historical criticism appears only by way of exception. . . .” In the rare instances that it does occur, “it immediately becomes clear that this method cannot be detached from a quite specific understanding of the world and reality,”¹⁶ a point seconded by Gerhard Ebeling.¹⁷ Hence to understand historical criticism not as some ideal, neutral method but as a methodology shaped by a particular view of the world, Reventlow maintains that “it is desirable that I should dig deeper and uncover the ideological and social roots to which more recent biblical criticism owes its origin, its deeper impetus and the direction of the answers which it gives,” thereby undertaking “the task of looking back at the beginnings of biblical criticism” so as “to uncover the motives, the intellectual presuppositions, the philosophical assumptions, and last, but not least, the developments in church politics, which have led to the conclusions at which it arrived.”¹⁸

We agree wholeheartedly, and offer the present work as a complement to *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. Reventlow set about diligently uncovering the roots of the historical-critical method as they stretch all the way into the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and (rather than solely focusing on Luther) he consequently made readers much more aware of the significant contributions made by the “Left Wing of the Reformation.” Moreover, he has pressed home the importance of early theological, political, and philosophical developments in England, paying much more attention to the Puritans and Deists. Reventlow’s newly translated *History of Biblical Interpretation* (four volumes) is

14 James Barr, foreword to Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, p. xii.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Gerhard Ebeling, “The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism,” in Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, translated by James Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 17–61; especially pp. 42–43.

18 Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, p. 2.

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likewise a much-needed contribution to a broadened treatment of the history of biblical scholarship.¹⁹

As much as we admire Reventlow's work, we believe that further and deeper reflection on the intellectual presuppositions and philosophical assumptions of historical criticism are in order, especially as these are formed and informed by politics in the broadest sense—both secular and Church politics, including the political philosophy and political aims of those who most profoundly defined the intellectual presuppositions and philosophical assumptions of modernity. That goal entails our spending time on figures that Reventlow either passes over too quickly or does not treat at all—such as Marsilius of Padua, Ockham, Machiavelli, England's Henry VIII, and Descartes—and bringing out a much different emphasis in figures he does treat, such as Wycliffe, Luther, Hobbes, Simon, Spinoza, Locke, and Toland.

Two other notable efforts in recovering the deeply buried presuppositions of the modern historical-critical method have recently been published in English. The first is John Sandys-Wunsch, *What Have They Done to the Bible? A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation*,²⁰ and the multivolume work under the editorial guidance of Magne Sæbø, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*—the second volume, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, being the most important for our consideration.²¹

Half of Sandys-Wunsch's book is dedicated to sketching out the thinkers in the centuries before the high Enlightenment, and so readers are made much more aware of how the foundations for biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century were laid much earlier. While his treatment is admirably broad, he cannot provide much depth under the constraints of such a short history.

The scholars gathered by Sæbø show an unusual breadth in their accounts of the historical, philosophical, theological, and political developments of the centuries that prepared for the full flowering of the historical-critical method, and the bibliographies well represent the best scholarship available. Clearly, Sæbø's work is the finest survey history of Old Testament interpretation now available, and will be the standard for many years to come. But the treatment often suffers under the constraints of its format. Any survey that deals with so many figures over so many years must sacrifice depth for breadth; and a collection of different scholars, each treating only a few figures, makes intense intellectual integration of the entire volume exceedingly difficult. As is the case with Reventlow, we believe that a more detailed account of key figures will provide a needed complement to Sæbø's fine efforts.

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- 19 Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 4 vols., translated by Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009–2010). Volume 1 is entitled "From the Old Testament to Origen," volume 2 is entitled "From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages," volume 3 is entitled "Renaissance, Reformation, Humanism," and volume 4 is entitled "From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century."
- 20 John Sandys-Wunsch, *What Have They Done to the Bible? A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).
- 21 Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*: Vol. II, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

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More recently, Pierre Gibert published his fine treatment of the history of modern historical biblical criticism, *L'invention critique de la Bible*, which has emphasized the important role of seventeenth-century scholars more than other similar treatments have done.²² Admirably, Gibert's work delves earlier than most studies, including a very brief treatment of Luther and the contribution of others to modern biblical criticism prior to the seventeenth century, but the focus of his attention (approximately 150 pages of his 377-page book) is on Spinoza and Simon. Indeed, although he mentions nearly 50 important figures within this history, on some he spends only a few sentences, and the overwhelming majority of his text is focused on the developments from Spinoza through the eighteenth century. Gibert's work likewise fails to treat adequately the philosophical and political undercurrents that gave rise to the very methods whose development he describes.

Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg have provided another survey, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, especially welcome because it digs deeper than most into the presuppositions of the historical-critical method that have resulted in what the authors call "the Agony of Historical Criticism," the "serious tension [that] exists between historical criticism and the church."²³ For Harrisville and Sundberg, there is an essential "theological and doctrinal conflict between historical criticism and the dogmatic tradition of the church." They "consider this tension to be nothing less than a war between two worldviews of faith: the worldview of modern critical awareness originating in the Enlightenment and the inherited Augustinian worldview of the Western church."²⁴ Harrisville and Sundberg understand the source of this tension to be Benedict Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), of which they remark that "the *Tractatus* is clear evidence that [the] historical-critical method originated in politically engendered hostility to the claims of faith."²⁵

Others have recognized that key figures like Spinoza who contributed to the development of the historical-critical approach were less than orthodox. But having noted that, little if anything is said about the effect unorthodox motives may have had on the development of the historical-critical approach.²⁶ In contrast, Harrisville and

22 Pierre Gibert, *L'invention critique de la Bible: XV-XVIII^e* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2010).

23 Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 2nd ed., pp. 2, 10.

24 Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 5.

25 Ibid.

26 See, for example, Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), who notes that Spinoza's efforts in biblical interpretation were spent "to discredit the appearance of supernatural authority," but then makes no attempt to examine Spinoza's universally acknowledged influence on the development of the historical-critical method (pp. 13–14). This parallels a larger omission, where Krentz asserts that the rise of historical criticism "introduced into biblical interpretation a new method based on a secular understanding of history," but then makes no further inquiry into the origins of the secular assumptions and aims that defined the method (pp. 1, 30, 48). We are simply informed, after a brief history of its rise, that "Today historical criticism is taken for granted; we cannot go back to a precritical age" (p. 33). Having said that, Krentz remarks that theologians should "ask that historians be as critical of philosophical assumptions as they are of theological ones" (p. 69), but does not himself follow his own advice.

Sundberg explore this very connection, focusing in part on the politicized aspects of the method. Obviously, from the title of the book, we also believe that the historical-critical method is somehow essentially defined by political aims.

While we share much of the assessment of Harrisville and Sundberg of the “agony” of historical criticism (again, their treatment of Spinoza is particularly well done),²⁷ we believe that the source of the tension lies historically much further back than the Enlightenment, and that defining the conflict in terms of the “Augustinian worldview” is too narrow. The late-eighteenth-century Enlightenment is not the beginning of the conflict, but the culmination of several centuries of a slowly building new, (it’s not a new secular as opposed to the old secular) secular worldview.²⁸ The tension that exists has its causes far deeper and broader than Augustinianism (of whatever stripe).

Other scholars besides Harrisville and Sundberg have called attention to the political aspects embedded in the historical-critical method, especially insofar as the sustained use of the method has a particular political effect upon its adherents. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith noted over thirty years ago, biblical studies programs “are on the whole calculated to turn a fundamentalist into a liberal.”²⁹

The term “liberal” here was not used by Smith in the rather crude, popular form of contemporary political discourse, but in the more technical form used in the history of ideas: beholden to the presuppositions and goals of modern liberalism, a particular political-intellectual movement that stretches back far beyond nineteenth-century Germany. Yet there is a connection between the popular meaning of liberalism and the more technical meaning. Liberalism even in the popular arena is associated with either the abandonment of religious beliefs (especially the exclusive beliefs in Judaism and Christianity) or the dissolution of theological dogma into mere moral precepts. But the more technical sense is well captured by Jon Levenson, taking up Smith’s point:

Smith’s use of the term “liberal” to designate historical-critical scholarship on the Bible is thus more than conventional: it is also profoundly appropriate. For historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political ideal. It is the realization of the Enlightenment project in the realm of biblical scholarship.³⁰

27 Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, ch. 2.

28 There is a growing scholarly trend to emphasize the theological roots of secular modernity. Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). These represent very important contributions to the study of modernity, but they fail to recognize the secularity implicit in the theological and philosophical movements they describe, as well as the politics such theologies served. Our present volume will unmask the secular politics underpinning these theological movements, from Nominalism to Gallicanism, which did indeed assist in the birth of modernity.

29 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,” *JAAR* 39 (1971), 132.

30 Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 118.

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Note that Levenson is saying more than what is often admitted about the historical-critical method, as, for example, by Edgar Krentz, that “Historical method is the child of the Enlightenment.”³¹ Going beyond this commonplace insight, Levenson considers the method itself to be an intrinsic part of the attempt to achieve a particular political vision, the “classical liberal political ideal,” undertaken as a kind of intellectual, social, religious, and political “project,” the Enlightenment project.

For Levenson, as with Reventlow, professional exegetes seem not to be sufficiently aware of the Enlightenment project *as* a project, but rather assume its characteristic presuppositions and goals as incorporated into a methodology to be the true and proper cure of dogmatic, ill-formed, and unscientific biblical fundamentalism. In assuming the truth of the Enlightenment project, Levenson warns, biblical scholars fall into professing “a secular equivalent to fundamentalism,” held with equally dogmatic tenacity, which “though it subjects all else to critique, it asserts axiomatically its own inviolability to critique.”³²

Such inviolability to critique would indeed seem to be a mark of a kind of intellectual fundamentalism. If turnabout is indeed fair play, it would be fair to subject the presuppositions of the historical-critical method to the same intense scrutiny as its proponents exercise on the biblical text, “suspecting the hermeneuts of suspicion,” to use Levenson’s apt phrase.³³ Levenson’s desire that we be suspicious of the historical-critical method itself (that is, to be both more historical and more critical, especially of its original intellectual and political presuppositions and aims) is shared by other scholars of the history of biblical interpretation, such as J. C. O’Neill and David Dungan.³⁴ This desire was also expressed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, in his famous Erasmus Lecture of 1988, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” wherein he too asserted that “What we need might be called a criticism of criticism,” that is, “a self-criticism of the historical method. . . .”³⁵

Some attention may now be paid to our title, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700*. Obviously, we intend more than a mere chronology of ideas; we hope to contribute to a critical and historical understanding of the historical-critical method itself. Our argument, to put it all too simply, is that the development of the historical-critical method in biblical studies is only fully intelligible as part of the more comprehensive project of secularization that occurred in the West over the last seven hundred years, and that the politicizing of the Bible was, in one way or another, essential to this project. By politicization, we mean the *intentional exegetical reinterpretation of Scripture so as to make it serve a*

31 Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, p. 55.

32 Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, p. 117.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

34 J. C. O’Neill, *The Bible’s Authority: A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

35 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 1–23; quote, p. 6.

merely political, this-worldly (hence secular) goal. Since this effort was largely undertaken by those who embraced a new secular worldview, the effect was to subordinate the method of interpreting Scripture to secular political aims. This subordination was essential in the early development of the modern historical-critical method.

We do not mean to claim, of course, that there is nothing more to the history of the development of modern scriptural scholarship than is outlined in the present work or that there is nothing of the historical-critical method that developed apart from the attempt to politicize exegesis. Yet we are convinced that the attempt to politicize the biblical text for quite secular purposes by such figures as (among others) Marsilius of Padua, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Toland is a largely untouched dimension in the accepted understanding of the historical development of the modern approach to Scripture, and yet this insight sheds much needed light on the formation of the historical-critical method *and* its effects.

A sign of the importance of this approach is the overlap that exists between the fatherhood of the modern historical-critical method and the fatherhood of modern political philosophy. At least two of the just-mentioned figures (Hobbes and Spinoza) are generally held as fathers of modern scriptural scholarship, and four (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke) are deemed fathers of modern political philosophy—that is, of political liberalism. The overlap is not accidental, and lends credence to Levenson's assertion that "historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political ideal."

But again, it has become clear, in ferreting out the historical connections, that we needed to go back much further even than the foundations of modern political thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Modernity's roots are deeper than most imagine, having their source in theological, philosophical, and political conflicts that arose in the late Middle Ages. That is why we begin the analysis with a chapter on Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham.

Before beginning an historical analysis of the earliest roots of the historical-critical method, we must give some kind of definition to the method under consideration, although we shall find that ultimately the best definition of the historical-critical method will slowly be revealed in the painstaking investigation of its origins.

If we might return to the relationship between the historical-critical method and its effects, we will better understand what it is as a cause. Here we wish to make clear again that we are not condemning the historical-critical method, but attempting to bring to light *why* it has particular characteristic effects that undermine or radically transform religious belief and *how* these effects are related to the method itself.

In Edgar Krentz's now standard short account of the historical-critical method, he states matter-of-factly in regard to its effects that "The method tends to freedom from authority and criticism of tradition. It treats biblical material in a different manner than theological thought had done for centuries, and in the process questions the validity of theological method."³⁶ As for defining the method itself, Krentz points to

36 Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, p. 4.

Ernst Troeltsch's famous authoritative essay "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology"³⁷ (1898) as the text that "formulated the principles of historical criticism."³⁸

Of course, as Troeltsch himself admitted, he did not formulate the principles of historical criticism himself, but gathered them from the approach taken by "*the historical method as such*," a method developed over the previous several centuries, and coming to full fruition in the nineteenth. He summarized rather than formulated.

For Troeltsch, the necessary effect of applying the historical method to Scripture was and is "the disintegration of the Christian world of ideas. . . ." "Once applied to the scientific study of the Bible and church history," declared Troeltsch, "the historical method acts as a leaven, transforming everything and ultimately exploding the very form of earlier theological methods."³⁹ The reason for this disintegration (or explosion), according to Troeltsch, is the irreconcilable difference that exists between the earlier dogmatic method, which presupposes certain historical facts, like the Resurrection, that stand outside a purely secular understanding of history, and the modern historical method, which assumes "secular history reconstructed by critical historiography."⁴⁰ Secular history assumes that miracles cannot happen or at least such miracles cannot be verified by the historical method. More accurately, secular history assumes that all alleged supernatural beings or events can be explained in natural terms.⁴¹

Since according to Troeltsch the historical method is essentially opposed to the dogmatic, then application of the historical method to Scripture can only result in treating it from the secular point of view—as one would any other artifact in the history of religions. The result would seem to be a complete relativizing of Christianity that, Troeltsch claimed, would indeed be "the consequence of the historical method only within an atheistic or a religiously skeptical framework." Troeltsch, a liberal Protestant, asserted that he was seeking "to overcome this relativism through the conception of history as a disclosure of the divine reason," wherein revelation is replaced by a "philosophy of history."⁴²

We do not need to assess the adequacy of Troeltsch's idealism in rescuing Christianity from the historical method, except to remark that it depends upon the reality of inevitable historical progress discernable with the secular historian's eyes, *and* that it was uttered just prior to the devastation of that notion of progress by World War I.⁴³ For our purposes, it is enough to have his admission that without some such

37 Ernst Troeltsch, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, translated by James Adams and Walter Bense (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 11–22.

38 Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, p. 55.

39 Troeltsch, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," p. 12.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

41 In Troeltsch's words, the historical method must always postulate an "analogy" between our contemporary experience and all experience. In the latter, all "phenomena" are "knit together in a permanent relationship of correlation . . . in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others." *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14, 20–22.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

43 For the radical way in which the experience of World War I affected the discipline of history (especially in the U.S.), see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

attempt, the historical method leads to skepticism or historical relativization of all dogmatic belief and also inclines to use by atheists and skeptics for the purposes of dissolving dogmatic belief.

Troeltsch's essay therefore vindicates the assessment of Harrisville and Sundberg of the essential tension that exists between the historical-critical method and Christian dogma, and Troeltsch well represents the accepted assumptions of the most important nineteenth-century exegetes of the historical-critical method. Krentz provides an apt summary of the effects:

It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism *the* approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. The Biblical books became historical documents to be studied and questioned like any other ancient sources. The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history had become the criterion for understanding the Bible.⁴⁴

Troeltsch's seminal essay, which so accurately sums up the assumptions and effects of the historical-critical method, allows us to see that what is significant about the method is not its appreciation for textual variants and literary forms, or its delving into historical context and comparative philology, but rather its premise: that *if history is to be scientific, it must exclude or reinterpret the supernatural*. The systematic exclusion of the supernatural and the consequent attempt to give natural explanations for events like miracles, theophanies, and other alleged irruptions of the divine or angelic effectively secularizes Scripture, making it one among many other manifestations of religious belief without verifiable substance. It relativizes and privatizes belief, or simply eliminates it as unscientific. In doing so, it removes Christianity as a political force, making of it at best a bearer of nondogmatic moral teachings that undergird the political order. There is no doubt that this transformation of Christianity accords nicely with the modern secular political aims. The question we pose here is: Did this happen by accident or design?

Let us return to Levenson's assessment that "historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political ideal." If Levenson is even close to the mark—and we think he has hit the bull's-eye—then we have a good reason to suspect that the historical-critical method is, in significant aspects, defined by motives other than the laudable desire to get at the truth of the biblical text using every available and appropriate means. According to Levenson, the historical-critical approach has an intrinsic aim, not found in Scripture itself, of *producing the beliefs that accord with modern secular political aims*, where religion is either reduced to mere private belief unsupported or rejected by reason and science, or made to serve as a moral prop for a particular kind of political order. The defining secular political aim is to keep religion from disturbing or significantly

44 Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, p. 30.

determining public life—an understandable aim, given that the modern historical-critical method was largely forged during and just after the great “wars of religion” that so disturbed political order in the late 1500s and a large portion of the 1600s.⁴⁵ But to say that it is an understandable aim only highlights the fact that it was an alien one, forced upon the text, rather than derived from it.

The two already-named presuppositions that contribute the most to achieving this aim through exegetical method are the bias against the supernatural and the notion that the core of Christianity is moral rather than dogmatic. A critical approach and a deeper knowledge of history do not produce these presuppositions, we shall argue. Rather, the presuppositions determine the way that exegetes are critical and the way that they use history. We hope to make this clear to the reader as the following chapters unfold.

Making these distinctions allows us to separate the tools used by the method from what might be called the guiding spirit that uses the tools. There is nothing intrinsically detrimental to belief in the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ in the attempt to establish as accurate a scriptural text as possible using every available manuscript; in the minute examination of the Hebrew or Greek language; in an in-depth historical analysis of ancient Palestine and first-century Rome; or in the investigation of literary forms and editorial layers in the New Testament. But the modern secular assumption *that the supernatural must be excluded* obviously makes belief in the Resurrection impossible. If that assumption becomes the guiding spirit that uses the tools of textual, philological, historical, literary, form, and redaction criticisms, then the critical use of the tools is defined by a secularizing aim. This union of tools with secularizing presuppositions constitutes what is almost invariably meant by the historical-critical method.

Obviously this thesis is controversial, and therefore we wish to argue for it with extreme care and with great attention to detail. We ask the reader in advance to be patient, for the argument must be substantiated by close analysis of seminal texts in modern political thought, philosophy, and theology, as well as treating in detail those pre-Enlightenment and early-Enlightenment figures now recognized as contributing directly to providing the foundations for the modern approach to Scripture. Moreover, all of this must be set in the proper historical and political contexts so as to make amply clear the importance of the nexus of political aim and exegetical method.

We begin this volume in the early fourteenth century with Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham, whose biblical interpretation cannot be separated from the politics that gave it shape. Marsilius and Ockham both became party players in Ludwig of Bavaria’s conflicts with Pope John XXII; although Ockham’s goals appear to have been

45 The work of William Cavanaugh has challenged greatly the notion that these so-called wars of religion were primarily concerned with doctrinal disputes; they were, rather, the final stages of the birth of modern centralized European states. See especially William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 123–180; and Cavanaugh, “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 397–420.

spiritual, Marsilius's were patently secular. The philosophy of Averroës is important here, because Marsilius imbibed Averroist philosophy, which elevated reason over revelation (and hence, for Marsilius, the rational state over religion). Marsilius, by his own design, and Ockham, inadvertently, placed the Bible in the hands of the state, which, coupled with Marsilius's naturalization of supernatural revelation and Ockham's denial of universals, paved the way for modernity and the modern secular state.

Our next chapter examines the work of John Wycliffe, a figure rarely included in studies of the history of historical criticism. As we explain, Wycliffe is an intermediary figure in the secularization of Scripture, connecting Marsilius to ideas that will emerge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in more explicit and overt ways. Despite Wycliffe's opposition to Ockham's thought, and notwithstanding the fact that he would have disagreed with Marsilius's wholesale subordination of the Church to the state, Wycliffe's proposal remained Marsilian in significant regards: He argued for theologians to serve the crown and upheld both disendowing the Church and a view of the monarch as an absolute ruler by divine right. His thought would thus prepare England to embrace the work of Marsilius in the English Reformation.

After Wycliffe, we turn to Niccolò Machiavelli, almost universally ignored in histories of modern biblical criticism (with the rare exception of Sæbø's one-thousand-plus-page volume that, unfortunately, devotes but a single paragraph to Machiavelli⁴⁶). With Machiavelli we find an animus toward tradition, priesthood, and in general any otherworldly aims that deflected from the glory and power of secular power—an animus that played itself out in very clear ways in later centuries, contributing immensely to the pure secularization of politics. Significantly, Machiavelli interprets Scripture through a very specific secular framework, helping set the stage for the use of worldly philosophical and political frameworks as the means of exegesis. Thus, for Machiavelli, only the truly "enlightened," that is, those with his secular framework, can understand Scripture properly.

We next come to our examination of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. We do not pretend to be exhaustive in our treatment of this movement, but we think an examination of Luther's place is instructive, especially in the ways in which the Reformation continued the political and secularizing trends that came before. First, Luther used the state as a force to counteract the power of the papacy, and thereby put enormous theological power into the hands of the state. Luther also self-identified as a follower of Ockham, thus helping to carry philosophy forward to its modern secular form. Moreover, his upholding of Scripture as a sole authority, in a more explicit and simple form than Wycliffe, provided the catalyst for the splintering of Christendom, which would invariably preclude theological resolutions and thus provided the occasion for political ones. The violent conflicts that subsequently engulfed Europe became the ostensible rationale for the creation of a scientific exegesis, a critical exegesis, that would aim at taming the fires of faith so as to achieve political peace.

From Luther we turn to King Henry VIII and the Reformation in England. Henry VIII's Reformation combined the philosophical and political strains from Marsilius,

46 Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, Vol. II, p. 102.

Wycliffe, and Machiavelli in a very practical subordination of theology and scriptural interpretation to the needs of the state. Henry's reign thus paved the way for Hobbes's political and exegetical work that gave the philosophical rationale for the complete subordination of scriptural interpretation to the political sovereign. The England that Henry VIII reshaped became a seedbed for the biblical scholarship launched by Hobbes and others like him that would eventually be replanted and thrive in the Germany of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

After Henry VIII, René Descartes is the next figure we explore. Descartes's work became fundamental for the biblical exegesis that followed in his wake. In significant ways, Descartes assisted the birth of modernity through the banishment of the supernatural. But Cartesian philosophy also entered biblical scholarship directly, primarily but not exclusively through the efforts of Spinoza and his followers. Moreover, the emphasis Descartes placed on method (defined, for him, by the rigor and form of mathematics) itself became a key factor in the development of biblical criticism and led to pretensions of methodological neutrality. Cartesian skepticism, his methodic doubt, was the critical link in the progression of thought that ended in the contemporary ideal: the ostensibly objective biblical interpreter, no longer an exegete but a quasi-scientific investigator whose method is significantly defined by skepticism of its subject matter.

The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes is the focus of our next chapter. Many of the same philosophical currents and political aims that preceded him—especially in Marsilius, Machiavelli, Henry VIII, and Descartes—came together in Hobbes's work. In it, the secular aims of Marsilius and Machiavelli combined with an Ockhamist Nominalism. Hobbes's biblical exegesis followed suit, justifying the absolute subordination of the Church to the state. Hobbes's method—which consisted of sifting through Scripture and positing earlier naturalistic and this-worldly origins to later, allegedly artificial theological and supernatural layers—set the tone for future biblical critical projects. For Hobbes, the point of his new method was to support the political ideal of the English polity, where the sovereign was head of both Church and state. This political agenda gave shape to his method, even as it was developed by later scholars who did not share Hobbes's political motives.

With our next chapter, we come to the figure of Baruch Spinoza, whose *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* sought to present a scientific method for biblical interpretation. Influenced by Machiavelli, Spinoza's political project was likewise Marsilian in his attempt to ensure the Church became nothing more than a purely suasive and politically subordinate association. Spinoza built upon the work of Hobbes and Descartes, bringing Cartesian skepticism fully into the realm of biblical interpretation. One point we emphasize in this chapter is the way in which Spinoza does not stand alone, but rather was a significant member of a circle of intellectuals, a complex web of skeptical associations of the Radical Enlightenment united in their attempts to deconstruct Scripture to serve a host of related political and philosophical ends. Through the Radical Enlightenment's embrace of Spinoza, and the many eighteenth-century responses to Spinoza, we can see the influence Spinoza's work had on future generations of scriptural scholars.

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The next father of historical criticism we discuss is Father Richard Simon. Simon responded to the skepticism of Hobbes and Spinoza, but in his response followed their exegetical program, albeit with more philological sophistication (thereby carrying forward what he intended to criticize). Simon's historical-critical project was aimed at defending Catholic tradition against Protestant claims of *sola scriptura*, but what he did was inadvertently ensure that Spinoza's approach to Scripture would continue into the eighteenth century and beyond.

Our penultimate chapter deals with John Locke, a significant figure too often omitted from studies of the history of biblical scholarship.⁴⁷ Locke's work is patently indebted to that of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Simon, whose works he assiduously studied, and like Marsilius and Machiavelli, Locke's biblical interpretation was at the service of the political order. His own exegesis was in the service of his Whig politics. Significantly, Locke provided core principles for judging the Bible historically, and because of his enormous international philosophical stature, these principles had a correspondingly enormous intellectual effect. Precisely because he was less overtly radical than either Hobbes or Spinoza, Locke's appropriation of their methods—along with Simon's—was carried into more mainstream circles in England, and furthered the development of biblical criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Our final full-length chapter is on John Toland and his role in the history of modern biblical criticism. In Toland, Spinoza's and Simon's works especially came together in his devastating deistic criticism of Scripture and Christianity. In this chapter we hope to show that the Deism represented by Toland was not a slow incremental enlightenment, but rather a very conscious subversion of traditional Christianity, one that demanded a corresponding subversion of Scripture. Toland's purpose was to domesticate Christianity in order to support his secular politics.

Finally, in our conclusion, we hint at some of the ways the history we have recounted in the previous chapters continued into eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with figures including Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Gotthold Lessing, Johann Salomo Semler, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, David Friedrich Strauss, and Julius Wellhausen. Our point here—in ending where most histories of scriptural scholarship begin—is to recast our whole understanding of the work of these famous, explicit proponents of the historical-critical method. In this account we do not wish to be partisan. Although we are Catholic scholars, we are not reading the history of biblical criticism in an apologetical spirit. It is true that most of the figures we examine found themselves in opposition to popes, or attacked the Catholic Church more broadly. But we make clear, especially in our chapters devoted to Machiavelli and Spinoza, that there existed real problems—at times even at the highest levels of Church authority—and the misdeeds of popes, prelates, and other Christians doubtless helped provoke the animus whose trajectory we trace. What we have attempted

⁴⁷ There are a few notable exceptions to this general neglect. See the fine treatments of Locke's role in the rise of modern biblical criticism in Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 4, pp. 51–65; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 261–286; and Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, pp. 243–285.



to do in this volume is uncover the fourteenth to mid-eighteenth-century roots of the historical criticism that emerged in the later eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and thus expose the secularization of Scripture that has walked through the halls of the academy and classrooms across the globe in the dress of objective science, impervious to critique. This inquiry should prove of the greatest interest to everyone, whatever his creed, concerned with the secularizing effects of the historical-critical method. In short, we have attempted a criticism of criticism, deracinating historical criticism's origins so that scholars might be able to assess more clearly the method's values, limits, and detriments.

But as we have made clear, even in this short introduction, in order to do this, we must begin with a look at the fourteenth-century political and philosophical context in which the process began; a process that would come to fruition five centuries later.

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