The Politics of Biblical Interpretation:
A 'Criticism of Criticism'

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Abstract

Following Joseph Ratzinger's call for a 'criticism of criticism', this article situates the history of modern biblical criticism in its political context within the centuries long church state conflict. Beginning with Medieval Muslim polemical literature, this article traces through history the politically and theologically motivated philological analyses and hostility toward spiritual exegesis which formed the foundation upon which eighteenth and nineteenth century biblical criticism built. Rather than the result of some objective scientific enterprise, the methods modern Bible scholars employed often served state politics as well as other prior commitments.

Keywords

Politics, Biblical Criticism, History of Interpretation

In 1989 Joseph Ratzinger published an essay entitled, 'Biblical Interpretation in Conflict'. In that essay Ratzinger spoke of the need for a 'criticism of criticism' ('Kritik der Kritik').[1] He discussed positive elements of modern biblical criticism, particularly historical criticism, as well as of more traditional exegesis. He also underscored some of the limits of modern criticism. In particular, he highlighted the often unrecognized philosophical foundations that undergird specific engagements with historical criticism. Although he singled out particular exegetes, namely Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, Ratzinger maintained that these two were not alone in allowing particular philosophical concerns and assumptions give shape to their historical methods and exegetical conclusions.[2] Ratzinger thus made

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[1] *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), pp. 15–44, quotation from p. 22. Unless otherwise mentioned, all English translations in this paper are my own.

[2] See also Michael Waldstein, 'The Foundations of Bultmann's Work', *Communio* 2 (1987), pp. 115–145.

a valuable observation: in their self-stylized attempts at objectivity, historical and literary scholars too often have been oblivious to real biases and prejudices that have affected their historical and literary work. The prior commitments of the scholars affect not only the conclusions they reach, but even the very methods they choose to employ.

This is not altogether unrelated to historian Peter Novick's historiographical work regarding the academic discipline of history within the United States. Here Novick likened the quest for objectivity in the writing of history to 'nailing jelly to the wall'.[3] Novick traces the attempts of historians to style themselves on the pattern of the natural and hard sciences. We can ascertain a similar tendency among historical critics inasmuch as they sometimes have been unaware of the difficulties involved in the quest for objectivity. As Ratzinger notes, often they neglect Heisenberg's lesson about the experimenter entering into the very experiment itself. In other words, these quixotic attempts at objectivity, valiant as they may be, sometimes blind exegetes to particular pitfalls inherent in modern criticism. This is not to deny the many important gains modern historical criticism has made; indeed we can attribute innumerable insights to modern biblical criticism. As we shall see below, however, the relationship of historical criticism with the theological enterprise has been more ambiguous than is usually thought.

Exegetes sometimes unwittingly become partisans in a much older political conflict: throne vs. altar. In a moment of brutal honesty, Albert Schweitzer conceded that the historical critical method, as applied to the quest for the historical Jesus, was in its roots, 'an aide in the struggle for deliverance from dogma'.[4] Such critical methods became state-sponsored tools used in their battles with the church. It should come as no surprise that the very states who supported such academic projects most (Germany, France, England), were also states concerned at various times with episcopal appointments, seizing church land, and exiling religious orders.

In this present article, I engage in the initial 'Kritik der Kritik' for which Ratzinger called, focusing on the historical connection between politics and the biblical criticism which laid the groundwork for later historical biblical criticism. I begin by tracing the roots of modern biblical criticism from medieval Muslim politics and polemics into the political world of medieval Christian theology. Next, I continue this trajectory into the Renaissance and Reformation, showing how the post-Reformation 'wars of religion' shaped the foundations of

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[3] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 7.

[4] Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben Jesu forschung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1906), p. 4.

early modern biblical criticism. Then I examine Enlightenment and nineteenth century historical criticism, highlighting nationalistic motivations in such criticism. Finally, I provide an overview of the historical church and state conflict which provides an unrecognized context for understanding the history of modern biblical criticism.

1. Medieval Political Precursors to Early Modern Historical Critics

One important, but often neglected, development that helped pave the way for the modern development of historical biblical criticism was the medieval Muslim appropriation of Gnostic, Roman, and Christian polemical literature that attacked the Jewish Torah.[5] Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064) is one of the earliest and most famous examples. In his work, 'Discerning between Religions, Ideologies, and Sects', Ibn Ḥazm employed a host of arguments deconstructing the Jewish Torah as well as the New Testament.[6]

Ibn Ḥazm witnessed firsthand the brutalities of politics within the caliphate structure in Muslim Spain, as his family went from a position of favorable political status with the ruling powers to political exiles during Ibn Ḥazm's time as a child. As an adult, Ibn Ḥazm proved to be an accomplished Muslim jurist, as well as a philosopher, philologist, and even poet. Politics like that of his childhood would reenter his life in a dramatic way when he found himself bypassed for an elite office in the caliphate which he believed should have been rightfully given to him. To add insult to injury, it was not simply to another skilled Muslim jurist that the office was handed, but rather it was given to the Jewish anti-Muslim polemicist, Shmuel Ibn Nagrela, known in the world of Judaism as Shmuel Ha Naggid (993–1056). This situation provides a crucial part of the context for understanding Ibn Ḥazm's polemical literature.[7]

Ibn Ḥazm's polemical literature, which targeted competing Muslim philosophical and legal schools as well as those of other religious traditions like Christianity, included over 100 pages of scathing polemics attacking Judaism. In retaliation to Ibn Nagrela, Ibn Ḥazm heaped opprobrium on his opponent, and likewise upon Judaism, and the

[5] Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. xi, 18, 28, 30, 42 n. 62, 45, 50, 59, and 63.

[6] English translation in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, 'Some Neglected Aspects of Medieval Polemics against Christianity', *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 1 (1996), p. 61.

[7] On Ibn Ḥazm's conflict with Judaism and with Ibn Nagrela, see Abdelilah Ljamai, *Ibn Ḥazm et la polémique islamo-chrétienne dans l'histoire de l'islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 30, 32–33, 40, and 40 n. 193; and Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 2–7, 129–131, and 145.

Torah. In fact, Ibn Ḥazm even wrote a tract specifically aimed at Ibn Nagrela, which he entitled, 'Refutation of Ibn al-Nagrela the Jew, may God curse him'.[8] In his criticisms, Ibn Ḥazm not only anticipated modern biblical historical and philological analyses, but also later anti-Semitism. Indeed, it appears that Ibn Ḥazm may have coined anti-Semitic phrases involving adjectives like 'dirty' and 're-pugnant' to describe Jews. R. David Freedman comments that, '. . .Ibn Ḥazm wrote with such fierce invective that he can scarcely say the word "Jew" without a prefixed epithet like "stinking," "foul," "vile," "villainous," and that good old stand-by "dirty"'.[9]

One of the foundations of his vitriolic barrage was the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Although this is a commonplace in contemporary scholarship, we must bear in mind that Ibn Ḥazm was one of the first scholars to make such a claim; he predates Ibn Ezra (1092–1167) by several decades. Ibn Ḥazm's arguments clearly anticipated what modern scholars now take for granted, and they were also sophisticated inasmuch as they were based on rigorous philological analysis (most likely of Arabic translations of the texts). Ibn Ḥazm's purpose in attacking the idea that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, however, was to weaken Jewish claims to maintaining any divine revelation. His method of critique sought out apparent contradictions, theological concepts which were untenable for traditional Muslims, and other such infelicities. As Camilla Adang writes, 'In this manner Ibn Ḥazm systematically analyzed the entire Tanakh in search of insupportable propositions'.[10]

Another key tactic Ibn Ḥazm employed against Judaism (and Christianity) was to attack allegorical interpretation. Ibn Ḥazm was completely opposed to allegorical interpretations, including of the Qur'an and Hadith.[11] This critique of allegory entered into certain segments of Christian discourse in the medieval period, and Ibn Ḥazm's other arguments critiquing the Hebrew Bible and other religious traditions were adopted by other medieval Muslims, most notably Ibn Rushd (Averroës), as well as by medieval Jewish scholars.[12]

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[8] English translation, with modified transliteration, from Camilla Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Ḥazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 67.

[9] R. David Freedman, 'The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship', *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989), pp. 33.

[10] Camilla Adang, 'Schriftvervalsing als thema in de islamitische polemiek tegen het jodendom', *Ter Herkenning* 16, no. 3 (September 1988), p. 199.

[11] Roger Arnaldez, *Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Ḥazm de Cordoue: Essai sur la structure et les conditions de la pensée musulmane* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1956), e.g., pp. 49 n. 1, 72–73, 309, and 319.

[12] Ljamai, *Ibn Ḥazm et la polémique islamo-chrétienne*, pp. 145–196; Lazarus-Yafeh, 'Some Neglected Aspects of Medieval Polemics', pp. 61–84; Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, pp. xi, 10, 44–46, 63–64, 68–69, 71–74, 136, and 140–141; and Muhammad Abu

Ibn Ḥazm's development of biblical critical arguments serving both his own political ambitions and the polemical concerns of segments of the medieval Muslim world was not the last time that politics would enter in as a factor in developing modern historical criticism. Marsilius of Padua (∼1275-∼1342) and William of Ockham (∼1288-∼1348) continued this trajectory, relying in part on the tradition of Averroës mediated in the Latin west. Ockham's students and other nominalists spread out from the University of Paris throughout Europe, e.g., to Heidelberg, Vienna, Cologne, etc. They sometimes brought with them a disdain for allegorical biblical interpretation, much like Ibn Ḥazm's, and laid a heavy emphasis on the *sensus literalis*.

In a subsection entitled, 'Modern Politics as Biblical Hermeneutics', John Milbank offers a lucid account of how the attacks on allegorical biblical interpretation, like Ockham's, served early modern politics.[13] Milbank explains:

> The traditional 'fourfold', 'spiritual' or 'allegorical' interpretation assumed and demanded a literal, historical meaning: every Biblical *signum* referred to a *res*. However, it conceived the *res*, as a divine, 'natural' sign, to have a plenitude of meaning which allowed the allegorical edifice to be erected. The literal, historical 'violence' of the *res* in the old covenant effaced itself, not just vertically towards 'eternal' meanings, but horizontally in the direction of the new reality of Christ-*ecclesia* with its charity, mercy and peace. This allowed the fullness of divine authority to devolve on Christ and then on the tropological interpretations of present Christians in the community of the Church.[14]

Marsilius's and Ockham's critiques of allegorical interpretation and the spiritual sense of Scripture served court politics. Both Marsilius and Ockham resided at the same time under the protection of Ludwig of Bavaria who was in conflict with Pope John XXII. The conflict primarily concerned control over Italian territories and thus with the temporal authority of the papacy. Marsilius supplied Ludwig with a theoretical justification for his desire for temporal sovereignty, and his arguments involved both a theological and a political critique of the papacy's claims to temporal authority.[15] In effect, Marsilius

Laila, 'Ibn Ḥazm's Influence on Christian Thinking in Research', *Islamic Quarterly* 31 (1987), pp. 103–115.

[13] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 [1990]), pp. 17–20.

[14] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory,* p. 20.

[15] Jürgen Miethke, 'Der Kampf Ludwigs des Bayern mit Papst und avignonesischer Kurie in seiner Bedeutung für die deutsche Geschichte', in *Kaiser Ludwig der Bayer. Konflikte, Weichenstellungen und Wahrnehmung seiner Herrschaft*, ed. Hermann Nehlsen and Hans-Georg Hermann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), pp. 39–74; and Hermann Nehlsen, 'Die Rolle Ludwigs des Bayern und seiner Berater Marsilius von Padua und Wilhelm von

desired to place state rulers over the Church within their realms, so that a council of state-appointed bishops could trump a pope.

Ockham's intent seems to have been to defend Franciscan poverty. Ockham was attempting to distinguish realms and defend his idea of Christian perfection which he thought John XXII was challenging. It might seem ironic that Ockham's admonition for the Pope (and clerics) to embrace poverty was an implicit, even if unintentional, call for wealth to be taken out of the hands of the Church and placed in the hands of state rulers like Ludwig of Bavaria. Consciously or not, Ockham's challenge to the papacy supplied Marsilius with further means of defending his theo-political ends. Marsilius and Ockham attacked the spiritual sense of Scripture, which they saw as supporting the papacy, and favored simply a literal-historical approach. In this we can detect another politically motivated attempt at biblical criticism that conveniently supported state politics; in this case, the politics of their protector, Ludwig of Bavaria, who opposed the pope.[16]

2. Reformation Politics and Early Modern Religious Wars

Between Ockham and the Reformation a whole host of critical tools were developed. Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457), for example, proved pivotal in his devastating critique of the authenticity of the *Donation of Constantine*, which, alongside the allegorical interpretation of the 'two swords' (Luke 22:36), had been used to buffer temporal papal authority. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) is another important, albeit more neglected figure in the rise of modern biblical criticism during this time period. Although his political thought is an area that is well known by scholars, Machiavelli's contributions to biblical criticism are comparatively less acknowledged. In fact, Machiavelli's political ideas significantly depended upon his interpretation of Moses. Additionally, Machiavelli influenced both Hobbes's and Spinoza's biblical criticism. Machiavelli's early turn to the history behind the texts became the central move Hobbes and Spinoza adopted in the seventeenth century.[17]

Following Valla and Machiavelli came all the tumult of the Reformation and a new importance to the biblical text as text. With its

Ockham im Tiroler Ehekonflikt', in *Kaiser Ludwig der Bayer*, ed. Nehlsen and Hermann, pp. 285–328.

[16] A.J. Minnis, 'Material Swords and Literal Lights: The Status of Allegory in William of Ockham's *Breviloquium* on Papal Power', in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 292–308.

[17] John H. Geerken, 'Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999), pp. 579–595; and Steven Marx, 'Moses and Machiavellism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (1997), pp. 551–571.

emphasis on *sola scriptura*, the Reformation took trends, manifest especially in Ockham, and went further than Renaissance thinkers in challenging the current understanding of patristic interpretation.

This attack on allegorical interpretation furthered the drive toward historical criticism, but again—as in the case of Ockham, Valla and Machiavelli—there were also political motives at play. As Travis Frampton makes clear:

> the Reformation was, at heart, politically engendered. What were the *protests* of Magisterial Reformers, if not political? Did Catholicism or Protestantism represent the *kingdom* of God on earth—and if the latter, which of its divergent forms would be representative? What part were churches of the Reformation to have in the numerous, religiously disparate European states? In the end, were leaders like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin satisfied with the Catholic Church, wanting only to reform church practice and dogma? Why did so many Lutheran and Reformed churches vie against Catholicism—and at times against each other—in order to become the established church of the (representative) state? Certainly the vision of Protestants did not exclude the political sphere![18]

And here it is interesting to note that the regions of Europe which remained Catholic through the Reformation had prior concordats that limited the pope's authority in their realms. Meanwhile, the Protestant Reformation was most successful in realms where there were no such means of limiting the pope's reach.[19]

The most important transition toward the rise of the historical critical method for interpreting Scripture can be found in the seventeenth century, beginning with Isaac La Peyrère (~1596–1676) who was a French Calvinist serving as the secretary for the Prince of Condé. At the behest of Queen Christina of Sweden (Renée Descartes's patroness), La Peyrère published his controversial *Prae-Adamitae*, which had already circulated widely throughout Europe, and had been criticized in print over a decade before it was itself formally published.[20]

La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae* was an attempt to argue that the Old Testament was in reality just the history of the Jewish people, rather

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[18] Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 13.

[19] William T. Cavanaugh, '"A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995), pp. 400–401.

[20] Fausto Parente, 'Isaac de La Peyrère e Richard Simon. Osservazioni preliminari ad uno studio del ms. Chantilly, Musée de Consé, n. 191 (698)', in *La Geografia dei saperi. Scritti in memoria di Dino Pastine*, ed. D. Ferraro and G. Gigliotti (Florence: Casa editrice Le Lettere, 2000), pp. 161–182; and Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), pp. 2, 5–6, 12–13, 45, 72, 80–81, 180 n. 50, 182 n. 76, 194–195 n. 2–44, and 199 n. 20.

than divine revelation. It appeared to be universal human history, but was mistaken on this account: Adam was simply the ancestor of the Jewish people. The people before Adam, pre-Adamites, were the ancestors of the Gentiles, and significantly, the French. The Old Testament itself was riddled with errors, as one might expect from any ancient historical document. Like Ibn Ḥazm, La Peyrère challenged the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in order to undermine any claims that the Pentateuch represented divine revelation. La Peyrère focused his criticism on repetitions in the text, alleged contradictions, as well as the death of Moses in Deuteronomy. While the Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch had never been regarded as a necessary requirement of fidelity to tradition in Judaism or Christianity, nonetheless it became a foundational issue for the theological debates over biblical criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[21] In general, both those who challenged and defended Mosaic authorship understood that attribution as a safeguard for divine inspiration.[22]

Additionally, however, we must keep in mind that La Peyrère served as secretary to the Prince of Condé. It appears that Queen Christina, Oliver Cromwell, and the Prince of Condé were involved in a plot to overthrow Louis XIV and place the Prince of Condé on the French throne. La Peyrère's biblical criticism appears to have been at the service of his political machinations. In his other work of biblical interpretation, *Du Rappel des Juifs*, La Peyrère envisioned the Prince of Condé as the King of France, ruling the world alongside the Messiah. This King would gather the Jews from across the globe to France, that land of *liberté* (at that time there were no slaves there), and return them to the Holy Land upon Jesus' return, after the Jews had converted to La Peyrère's version of a Christianity, which was devoid of anything that he feared might offend Jewish sensibilities. It should come as no surprise that La Peyrère's work was condemned, and that he was forced to convert to Catholicism. He spent the remainder of his days with the French Oratorians.[23]

Next is Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who wrote his *Leviathan* while in self-imposed exile in Paris. With the Thirty Years' War fresh in his mind, Hobbes fled to France to escape the conflagration which consumed England during its civil war. Hobbes's entire political

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[21] Jon D. Levenson, 'The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture', *Journal of Religion* 68, no. 2 (1988), pp. 205–225.

[22] Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, pp. 50 and 71–74.

[23] R.H. Popkin, 'Millenarianism and Nationalism—A Case Study: Isaac La Peyrère', in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture: Continental Millenarians: Protestants, Catholics, Heretics*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2001), pp. 78–82; and Susanna Åkerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden and Her Circle: The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 11, 32, 186, 202–204; and 213–215.

theory was grounded in an ontology of violence, of a 'warre of every man against every man'.[24] The absolute sovereign was Hobbes's solution to such violence. This absolute sovereign had to be the head of both the state and the church. For Hobbes, the sovereign, or the officials she appointed, became *the* authority on matters of biblical interpretation. Central to such a hermeneutical task, in Hobbes's mind, was curtailing allegorical interpretations, which seemed often to support Catholic transnational pretenses. Hobbes believed the better approach was to judge Scripture through the proper use of reason and focus exclusively on a historical reading of the texts.

Hobbes's biblical exegesis was an attempt to justify the status quo before the war, wherein the state sovereign was both head of the church and the state. In addition to his nearly complete denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch based solely on three verses (Gen. 12:6; Num. 21:14; Deut. 34:6), Hobbes had an eschatological concern: he interpreted the Bible in such a way that no eternal fate was better or worse than what the state sovereign could grant. Hobbes saw the concept of hell as a threat to the security of the state, since such security rested upon the fear of physical death the power of which must lie in the hands of the sovereign.[25]

The similarities between Hobbes's project and La Peyrère's is not likely the result of mere coincidence, particularly since Hobbes walked in the same circles as La Peyrère. Moreover, it is possible that Hobbes was motivated by theological concerns; in the England of his time, his views concerning church and state relations would not have been viewed as heterodox, even though some of his other less orthodox views led to his denunciation as an impious atheist. Though Spinoza preferred democracy to Hobbes's ideal of monarchy, Spinoza's elaboration on Hobbes's work guaranteed that Hobbes's turn to history would survive into the next century.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) wrote his famous *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* as an attempt to support the politics of Jan De Witt, who was running the Dutch Republic during a very tumultuous time.[26] Spinoza not only relied upon the works of both Hobbes and La

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[24] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1651]), II.9.

[25] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, III.33 and III.38; Jeffrey L. Morrow, '*Leviathan* and the Swallowing of Scripture: The Politics behind Thomas Hobbes's Early Modern Political Biblical Criticism', *Christianity & Literature* (forthcoming); Michel Malherbe, 'Hobbes et la Bible', in *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, ed. Jean-Robert Armogathe (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), pp. 691–699; and Arrigo Pacchi, 'Hobbes and Biblical Philology in the Service of the State', *Topoi* 7 (1988), pp. 231–239.

[26] For more detailed analyses placing Spinoza's biblical criticism in its political and historical context, see Jeffrey L. Morrow, 'The Early Modern Political Context to Spinoza's Bible Criticism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming); J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau, 'La lecture de la Bible dans le cercle de Spinoza', in *Grand Siècle*, ed. Armogathe, pp. 97–115.

Peyrère, whose books have been preserved in his library, but it seems almost certain that he also drew upon the medieval Muslim polemical literature of Ibn Ḥazm. At least fourteen of Spinoza's arguments concerning biblical criticism are found in sixteen (of over 1,000) pages of Ibn Ḥazm's *Al-Faṣl*.[27] Like Ibn Ḥazm, Spinoza thought it was important to see the Torah abrogated so that it only applied to the Hebrew nation of the Old Testament.

One of Spinoza's motivations may have been to get revenge on the Jewish community in Amsterdam that had banned him from their community.[28] Spinoza was kicked out of the Jewish community in Amsterdam at a very young age. We do not know the precise theological reasons, or even if there were clear ones, for his ban. The archival evidence suggests that Spinoza was banned in part because he jeopardized the relative autonomy of Amsterdam's Jewish community by circumventing their authority structures in the matter of personal debt. In order to free himself from the debts he owed, Spinoza went to the secular Amsterdam authorities to request a legal guardian, which was granted him, as opposed to turning to the synagogue to settle the matter, which was expected.

Regardless of his motivation for limiting the authority of the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza's hermeneutical program consisted of a historical method upon which historical criticism would thenceforth build. The method called for discovering the complete histories of textual transmission, canonization, as well as the original meaning and content of each biblical book and author. Given that all of this must be ascertained before any theological interpretation could begin, Spinoza's amounts to an impossible task.[29]

Like Hobbes, Spinoza may have had genuine theological concerns. As David Dungan points out, however, 'Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the

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[27] Freedman, 'Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship', pp. 31–38. Freedman isolates twenty arguments Spinoza employs to make his methodological case for modern biblical criticism. Fourteen of these arguments, a full two thirds, Freedman traces back to sixteen pages of Ibn Ḥazm's 1050 page *Al-Faṣl*. On how Spinoza's work relies upon medieval Muslim scholarship see Ramón Guerrero, 'Filósofos hispano-musulmanes y Spinoza: Avemplace y Aben-tofail', in *Actas del Congreso Internacional sobre 'Relaciones entre Spinoza y España' (Alamgro, 5–7 noviembre 1992)*, ed. Atilano Domínguez (Murcia: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1994), pp. 125–132; and Roger Arnaldez, 'Spinoza et la pensée arabe', *Revue de synthèse Paris* 89–91 (1978), pp. 151–174.

[28] Of course, it is difficult to know the exact reasons for his ban, but Vlessing indicates that it was as much a family feud as a theological debate. See Odette Vlessing, 'The Excommunication of Baruch Spinoza: A Conflict Between Jewish and Dutch Law', *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997), pp. 15–47.

[29] See the 7th chapter of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* in the 3rd volume of Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925).

ground'.[30] Hence many of those who continued upon his trajectory nevertheless sought to distance themselves from Spinoza even as they relied upon his methodological framework. Spinoza's new historical biblical methodology in *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* did not serve theology so much as his own political theory expressed in that text. The political project had broad appeal for emerging modern states, as indicated by the fact that Spinoza was offered a pension to dedicate another work to King Louis XIV of France, and that (no-longer Queen) Christina of Sweden's brother offered him a professorship at the University of Heidelberg, both of which Spinoza turned down.

The Oratorian priest Richard Simon (1638–1712) expanded upon the work of La Peyrère (whom he befriended when they both lived among the Oratorians), Hobbes, and Spinoza, even while disagreeing with them at many points. Simon developed much of his criticism while in dialogue and debate with French Calvinists. In many ways, his work was partially an apologetic for the Catholic tradition. Simon attempted to demonstrate the numerous historical and textual problems with the biblical texts and manuscripts in order to highlight the importance of infallible Catholic tradition which, he argued, is able to preserve God's truth when faced with so many historical and textual problems as the Bible contains.

At the same time, however, Simon appears to have been a state supporter, over and against the papacy. He attempted to dedicate his controversial *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* to King Louis XIV, but was blocked by Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704). His book was suspect, so he was asked to send it to the ecclesiastical authorities, but he excised the controversial portions, mainly the sections that challenged the Pentateuch's Mosaic authorship, before sending the authorities a manuscript. When he was forbidden to publish his book in France and it was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books, he sought publishers outside of Catholic France, and published the book in the Dutch Republic. He was eventually expelled from the Oratorian Order.[31]

Simon's work was used in England as a tool to dismantle the authority of the Bible. Indeed, John Locke, who was already quite familiar with Hobbes's work, was captivated by Simon's biblical

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[30] David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 172.

[31] Francis W. Nichols, 'Richard Simon: Faith and Modernity', in *Christianity and the Stranger: Historical Essays*, ed. Francis W. Nichols (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 115–168; John D. Woodbridge, 'Richard Simon le «père de la critique biblique»', in *Grand Siècle*, ed. Armogathe, pp. 193–206; and Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne (1680–1715)*, vol. 3 (Paris: Boivin, 1935), pp. 125–136. On Simon's biblical criticism, see Sascha Müller, *Kritik und Theologie: christliche Glaubens-und Schrifthermeneutik nach Richard Simon (1638–1712)* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2004).

criticism, and annotated more than one edition of his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*.[32] This is significant, since German biblical scholarship would initially feed off of English biblical criticism, even as later English biblical criticism often grounded itself on nineteenth century German scholarship.[33] Simon's philological and historical analyses became the foundational work in France and Germany for the kind of close philological analysis that would emerge in the eighteenth century as the dominant historical method, transforming the Bible from a primarily theological text to an ancient cultural source with the potential to be used to shape and form servants of colonial states.

3. Between Athens and Jerusalem: The Enlightenment and State Sponsored Biblical Criticism

It is in the eighteenth century that we find exegesis recognizable today as historical criticism consciously severed from ecclesial or theological foundations. Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), one of the first to engage in such criticism, brought Simon's works into German.[34] By translating his posthumously published *Ethics*, Johann Lorenz Schmidt brought Spinoza into the German reading world. Schmidt's goal, as Jonathan Sheehan explains, was 'to tear the Bible out of the hands of traditional Christian theology'.[35] Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) emerged as the paragon of philological analysis, and brought such analyses into the modern world bereft of explicit theological concerns. Michaelis was committed to his theology, but in his work the Bible was transformed into a cultural artifact and biblical studies was transformed into a form of cultural historical studies.[36]

One significant change that took place in the German speaking world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was that the moral, theological, and authority structures and discourse which located its foundation in the Old Testament were supplanted by Classical Greek and Roman cultural values and civic authority structures. The culmination of such attitudes can be found in Julius Wellhausen's

[32] Justin A.I. Champion, 'Père Richard Simon and English Biblical Criticism, 1680–1700', in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin: Essays in His Honor*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 39–61.

[33] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. xii, xiv, and 89.

[34] John Woodbridge, 'German Responses to the Biblical Critic Richard Simon: From Leibniz to J.S. Semler', in *Historische Kritik und biblischer Kanon in der deutschen Aufklärung*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Walter Sparn, and John Woodbridge (Wiesbaden: Harrossowtiz, 1988), pp. 65–87.

[35] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, p. 126.

[36] Michael Chris Legaspi, 'Reviving the Dead Letter: Johann David Michaelis and the Quest for Hebrew Antiquity', (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2006).

friend and colleague Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848–1931).[37]

The founding purpose of particular universities in the eighteenth century German speaking world was often explicitly connected with matters of state. As an example, the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, where Wellhausen was later a student and then a professor until his death, began to produce qualified state officials for King George II, for whom the university was named. In general, the production of faithful state servants was the very *raison d'être* of German universities; the German university was in a very real way a tool of the state.[38]

Michaelis was the premier Bible scholar of the eighteenth century and was one of Göttingen's early professors. He played a crucial role in converting the study of the Bible from a primarily theological task to the examination of a cultural and historical artifact. If politics played less of an explicit role in Michaelis's work than it had in the previous century for Hobbes and Spinoza, it nevertheless provided an underlying framework, involving a complex network of assumptions, within which Michaelis operated.

Michaelis's work was profoundly shaped by classical philology, as practiced within the general neo-humanist movement then reigning in the German-speaking world, and particularly as advanced by his teacher Johann Matthias Gesner (1691–1761) and colleague Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812). Gesner's famous Seminarium Philologicum at Göttingen set the standard for rigorous classical philology, and would influence the practice of ancient philology up to the present. The key context in which the Philological Seminar operated, and which it developed further, was one where the humanistic discipline of philology itself formed scholars in a particular way that was intended to shape them into productive useful civic gentlemen. Philology became an important component in a wider cultural process of building up a robust civil society. Michaelis was instrumental in carrying the type of philological methodology epitomized both by Gesner and his successor Heyne into the realm of biblical studies, justifying such study apart from any explicit theological rationale.[39]

We find the epitome of such modern endeavors in the work done at the University of Berlin (founded in 1810).[40] Schleiermacher

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[37] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, p. 213. See also the comments in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969 [1944]), pp. 370 n. 42, 372–373 n. 46 and 376 n. 77; and 378 n. 97.

[38] Legaspi, 'Reviving the Dead Letter', pp. 18, 30–31, 38–40, and 51.

[39] Brian Vick, 'Greek Origins and Organic Metaphors: Ideals of Cultural Autonomy in Neo-Humanist Germany from Winckelmann to Curtius', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3 (2002), pp. 483–500.

[40] Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 8–20.

and his only son's godfather Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1849) radically transformed the theological curriculum at Berlin as members of its first theological faculty.[41] Building on the model of the Enlightenment university, namely Göttingen, the University of Berlin set the standard for western universities devoted to the concerns of the modern project. Sheehan has emphasized how both Schleiermacher and even more so de Wette excluded Jews and Catholics from their modern endeavors, which, in the case of Schleiermacher, was an attempt to refashion Christianity apart from any biblical moorings. The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement is one nineteenth century pinnacle of these trends within the German-speaking academy.[42]

During this time, Christianity became ever more associated with the Greco-Roman world in German-speaking scholarship at the same time that German culture represented in the academy was attempting to find inspiration from Greco-Roman antiquity. A sharp dichotomy was beginning to take shape, influenced by comparative philology, between what would be called Aryan or Indo-European (Greek, Indian, etc.) and Semitic (especially Jewish and Muslim). Scholars began severing Christianity from its Jewish roots and presenting it, along with newly 'discovered' Buddhism, as an Aryan or Indo-European (Greek) religious tradition distinct from the wholly Semitic Judaism, and Islam which, although the majority of Muslims then as now were non-Arabs, was viewed as completely Semitic.[43]

Wilamowitz's work in classical philology became an attempt to conquer the classical world through his scholarship, and uphold classical antiquity as a model for German culture. His work cannot be completely separated from the Prussian nationalism which inspired him.[44] Likewise, Prussian and German nationalism was at the heart of most such endeavors to secularize the study of the Bible in the German academy.[45]

Secularization, in this context, should not be confused with the more common understanding entrenched in some post-Enlightenment desire to see the end of 'religion', but rather in the privatization of 'religion' begun with the Nominalist movement and the Reformation itself, notwithstanding how theological and 'religious' such movements may have been. As such, this secularization is

[41] Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 50–51.

[42] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, pp. 230, 234–236 and 238–239.

[43] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xii–xiii, 24–26 and 145, 147, 149, 152 and 179–206.

[44] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, p. 213; and Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Religious History without Frontiers: J. Wellhausen, U. Wilamowitz, and E. Schwartz', *History and Theory* 21 (1982), pp. 49–64.

[45] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, p. 233.

epitomized in the dissolution of the monasteries in the Reformation and early modern period.[46] After all, the primary definition the *Oxford English Dictionary* has for 'secularization' is the transformation of religious institutions and property for non-religious use and ownership.[47] Thus, religious and theological concerns do not preclude such drives for secularization. In fact, as Michael Gillespie has recently shown, what is often called the modern secular project has always been undergirded with theological concerns.[48]

Religionswissenschaft and its philology, as well as *Religionsgeschichte* and its philhellenism, developed in a context that upheld what was understood as Aryan (Greco-Roman, Indo-European), in which was placed a de-Judaized New Testament and early Christianity, and which denigrated Semitic culture, especially the Old Testament and Islam.[49] It is in this broader cultural context that Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), a Bismarck admirer, entered the scene.[50] One result, intended or unintended, of the biblical historical scholarship of the time, was an anti-Judaism among certain scholarly circles in Germany that worked its way well into the twentieth century. Such anti-Jewish sentiments initially pushed for the removal of the Old Testament from Christian Scripture (Adolf von Harnack), to the Old Testament's replacement with German folklore (Friedrich Delitzsch), to the legal separation of Jews from Gentiles within the German state (Gerhard Kittel).[51]

Such anti-Jewish leanings were present already in Wellhausen's work.[52] In nations where governments and peoples adopted a hostile stance toward the Catholic Church, and particularly toward the papacy, anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism often went hand-in-hand with anti-Catholicism. Stanley Hauerwas insightfully remarks that:

> Catholics understood they often became for Protestants the Jews, that is, Catholics had been surpassed. Nowhere was this more apparent than

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[46] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400 – c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005 [1992]), pp. 383–385, 397, 402–403, and 462.

[47] *The Oxford English Dictionary Vol. XIV: Rob-Sequyle*, 2nd ed., prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 849.

[48] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[49] Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, pp. xii–xiii, 24–26 and 145–206.

[50] Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli*, pp. 91–102.

[51] Wayne A. Meeks, 'A Nazi New Testament Professor Reads the Bible: The Strange Case of Gerhard Kittel', in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. H. Najman and J.H. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 513–544; and Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, 'A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's "Babel und Bibel" Lectures', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 3 (2002), pp. 441–457.

[52] Moshe Weinfeld, *Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 286–290; and Rudolf Smend, 'Wellhausen und das Judentum', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 79, no. 3 (1982), pp. 249–282.

in the scholarly guilds surrounding the study of scripture in which Second Temple Judaism became the dead priest-ridden religion that the charismatic Christianity of the New Testament replaced. Protestant biblical scholarship simply reproduced that story with their triumph in the Reformation.[53]

4. A Tale of Two Cities?: Church and State

An important factor in understanding the political context discussed above is the role of the papacy as a transnational institution. The familiar story is that of the papacy's rise to political power out of a perceived necessity after Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople. However, the less known drama involved the long process of state centralization beginning in at least the eleventh or twelfth century with local rulers, princes, nobles and kings. This development culminated in the birth of modern states, which many date to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. As rulers attempted to centralize, strengthening royal tribunals over and against ecclesiastical courts, extracting resources from the peasantry, liquidating or subsuming guilds and waging and winning wars, the papacy became ever more an obstacle to various rulers' desires for sovereignty.[54]

Religious orders, particularly those that circumvented the authority structures of state-appointed national bishops, became signs of the transnational authority of the pope who was viewed as a threat to state autonomy.[55] As late as 1829, the bishops of 555 of the 646 dioceses spread across the globe were appointed by heads of state.[56] Resistance to the transnational Catholic Church was named differently in different regions of Europe: e.g., Josephism in Austria and Pombalism in Portugal. These movements began with real theological concerns in a growing medieval Conciliarism that found an answer to the question of ultimate authority in ecumenical councils as opposed to the papacy.[57]

[53] Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 73 n. 46.

[54] William T. Cavanaugh, 'Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good', *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004), pp. 243–274; and Cavanaugh, 'Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House', pp. 397–420.

[55] E.g., Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 240–291.

[56] Richard F. Costigan, S.J., 'State Appointment of Bishops', *Journal of Church and State* 8, no. 1 (1966), pp. 82–96.

[57] William L. Portier, 'Church Unity and National Traditions: The Challenge to the Modern Papacy, 1682–1870', in *The Papacy and the Church in the United States*, ed. Bernard Cooke, pp. 25–54 (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 27–37.

French Gallicanism became the paradigmatic expression of Conciliarism, just as France emerged victorious from its violent civil wars as the paradigmatic modern state. What began as a theological debate quickly became a political tool in the form of the Gallican Articles which would elicit a formal response from the papacy in the First Vatican Council's document, *Pastor Aeternus*.[58] In an international church where the majority of bishops were appointed by heads of state, it is easy to see how the call for a council of bishops trumping the papacy was a thinly veiled argument for state dominance over the Church. It is in this context that Ultramontanism developed as a popular transnational Catholic movement centered around the papacy, involving a complex web of devotional practices particularly focused on Marian devotions.[59] Such a response, which was both political and theological, was expressed in Vatican I's dogmatic definition of papal infallibility in *Pastor Aeternus* (1870), in Pope Leo XIII's Neo-Thomistic revival represented especially in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), and in the Church's attack on Modernism epitomized in Pope Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907).[60]

Already on the eve of the Reformation rulers in Europe viewed the papacy's transnational nature as a threat to their desires for sovereignty. Rulers in places like Spain, Naples, and France secured concordats limiting the pope's authority within their realms through their ability to appoint bishops, curtail papal taxes, etc. Pre-Reformation concordats were an attempt by Catholic regions to increase their sovereign authority, just as state rulers unable to broker such concordats used the Protestant Reformation as justification for their authority in their realms over and against the papacy.[61]

This battle between states and the Church, and particularly against the transnational nature of the Church and thus against the office

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[58] Klaus Schatz, *Der päpstliche Primat: seine Geschichte von den Ursprüngen bis zur Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Echter, 1990), pp. 174–187; and Portier, 'Church Unity and National Traditions', pp. 27–37.

[59] Eamon Duffy, *Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006 [1997]), pp. 260–318; all the essays in Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., ed., *Varieties of Ultramontanism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998); and Portier, 'Church Unity and National Traditions', pp. 27–37.

[60] William L. Portier, *Divided Friends: Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States* (New York: Paulist Press, forthcoming), chapters 1–2; all of the essays in Darrell Jodock, ed., *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Joseph A. Komonchak, 'The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism', *Annual of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs* (1985), pp. 31–59; and James Hennesey, S.J., 'Leo XIII's Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event', in *Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure,* ed. David Tracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 185–197.

[61] Cavanaugh, 'Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House', pp. 400–401.

of the papacy, is an important but too often neglected part of the background to the rise of modern biblical criticism.[62] As we have seen, one of the earliest occurrences of biblical criticism that laid the groundwork for modern historical criticism was within the medieval Muslim world. The Muslim polemical development of biblical criticism epitomized in Ibn Ḥazm served a political role, particularly in relationship to the Caliphate structure. When these critical methodologies, assumptions, and conclusions are brought into the medieval world of Christendom, we see some of the ways they entered into the throne vs. altar debate we have just described. In the early modern and enlightenment periods especially we see how previous work in such criticism served also as tools of statecraft, explicit claims to objectivity notwithstanding: seventeenth century scriptural exegesis underpinned early modern monarchical and democratic politics alike; eighteenth century biblical philology served colonial and imperial designs; and nineteenth century historical criticism was often at the service of nationalist concerns.

What then does this mean for the theologian and for the Bible scholar? It means that we should heed Ratzinger's call for a *Kritik der Kritik*. We must not become complacent and rest our work on assumptions that the critical methodologies we use are completely bereft of particular commitments. As Jon Levenson underscores, 'the secularity of historical criticism represents not the suppression of commitment, but its relocation'.[63] We cannot abandon the historical critical method, but nor should we confuse its hypotheses with revealed dogma.[64]

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