

The Bible after Babel

Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age

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HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBTh	<i>Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie</i>
JES	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series
NEA	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLBSNA	Society of Biblical Literature Biblical Scholarship in North America
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SHANE	Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
ThB	<i>Theologische Bücherei</i>
ThLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Historical Criticism and Its Postmodern Critics

The story of the tower of Babel is told briefly and enigmatically in Gen 11:1-9, at the end of the Primeval History in the J (Yahwist) source. In the beginning, people had one language and the same words throughout the earth. They attracted the attention of the Lord, however, by building a city and a tower, with its top in the heavens, to make a name for themselves. The Lord figured that this was only the beginning of what they would do and, since they were one people with one language, nothing would be impossible to them. To prevent further developments, the Lord went down and confused their language and scattered them abroad over the face of the earth. Therefore the city was called "Babel," because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth.

This intriguing little story has received more than its share of scholarly attention.¹ Commentators have noted that there seem to be two distinct themes in the story: the attempt to build the city and tower and the confusion of language, and, inevitably, source critics have tried to separate the two. On one level, at least, the story is an etiology for the diversity of languages. On another level, it recapitulates a recurring theme in the primeval history — the futile attempts to bridge heaven and earth, whether by hu-

1. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*. CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 531-57; Ellen von Wolde, "The Tower of Babel as Lookout over Genesis 1-11," in *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 11:1-9*. Biblical Interpretation 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 84-109.

man beings becoming like God or by "sons of God" becoming human. As the story stands, the confusion of languages seems to be a punishment for human hybris, or at least an attempt by a defensive God to protect his realm from human encroachment. Neither the building nor the confusion of languages is viewed positively. Rather, the story seems to be a final episode in the gradual fall of humanity from the pristine glory of Eden to the postlapsarian condition of human history.

In recent years, this story has received new attention, even attracting notice from one of the icons of postmodernism, Jacques Derrida.² The distinctive postmodern take on the story, however, reverses the traditional evaluation. The enterprise of building the tower is still viewed negatively, but the confusion of languages is celebrated as liberation. On the one hand, some critics, especially from the Third World, see the city and tower as symbols of dominion and oppression.³ This reading acquires credibility from the historical relation between Babylon and Israel and the obvious taunting of Babel in the perverse explanation of the name,⁴ even if there is nothing explicit about oppression in the biblical text.⁵ The confusion of languages, then, bespeaks political liberation, insofar as each people is freed to pursue its own identity. On the other hand, from a more philosophical perspective, the tower has been taken as a symbol of the aspiration to total, comprehensive, and unitary interpretation, and the con-

2. Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Poststructuralism as Exegesis*, ed. David Jobling and Stephen D. Moore. Semeia 54 (1992), 3-34. According to Derrida, "the 'tower of Babel' does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something of the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics. . . . It would be easy and up to a certain point justified to see there the translation of a system in deconstruction" (3-4).

3. See the reflections on "Genesis 11:1-9: A Latin-American Perspective," by José Míguez Bouino, Solomon Avotri, and Choan-Seng Song, in *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 13-33; and Danna Nolan Fewell, "Building Babel," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 1-15.

4. The etymology is based on the Hebrew root *bl*, which in Westermann's judgment has "only a slight resemblance to Babel" (553). The Akkadian understanding of the name is "gate of God." The inaccuracy of the etymology was noted by Voltaire, who thought that the name signified "city of God." See Derrida, 4.

5. The etymology could easily be viewed as a secondary addition to the story. As Westermann remarks, it is "quite independent and the narrative is complete without it" (553).

fusion of languages has come to symbolize the celebration of diversity. In the context of biblical studies, historical criticism, or the dominant mode of biblical criticism for the last two centuries or so, has been cast as the tower, and the confusion of languages is taken as the joyful eruption of a chatter of new approaches. The issue, of course, is not what the biblical text of Genesis 11 "really meant." Some postmodern critics would deny that a text has any "real meaning" at all. The story simply provides familiar imagery that can serve to visualize the situation in which biblical criticism, and perhaps academia in general, finds itself at the beginning of the 21st century.⁶

It is not the case that the postmodernists have captured the field. Far from it. Diversity of approaches is at best a mixed blessing, and sometimes threatens to become a curse. But neither is traditional historical criticism accurately described as the totalitarian monolith that some of its critics make it out to be. I will begin by reflecting on the character of historical criticism as I understand it. I will then consider some of the distinctive features of postmodern approaches and consider the application of some of them in biblical studies.

I should say at the outset that by training and temperament I am on the modern side of the modern/postmodern debate. My brain has not incubated in the languages of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Stanley Fish (if indeed incubation is what happens to a brain in these environments). But it also seems to me that there are some valid concerns and significant insights in the welter of new approaches. Historical criticism has always been a process rather than a technical method, and if it can be said to construct a tower, it has always been a work in progress, whose design and orientation are constantly subject to change. I do not think it either likely or desirable that God's gym and God's beauty parlor will become the twin towers of biblical interpretation in the coming century,⁷ but it would be naive to think that scholarship a century from now will look much like it does today, whatever form it may take.

6. For Babel as metaphor for the situation in the field of ethics: Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

7. Cf. S. D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996); *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Moore, to his credit, has no evident hegemonic intentions.

The Character of Historical Criticism

"Historical Criticism" is the label usually applied to what might be termed "mainline" biblical scholarship over the last two centuries or so. As James Barr has insisted, historical criticism is not strictly a method, but a loose umbrella that covers a range of methods (source criticism, form criticism, sociological criticism, etc.) that may sometimes be at odds with each other.⁸ In fact, it is not unusual to narrate the history of biblical scholarship as a succession of methods, each of which initially exhibited its anxiety of influence by attempting to kill its father, and whose fathers sometimes disowned the offspring.⁹ What these methods have in common is a general agreement that texts should be interpreted in their historical contexts, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of their time. There is also a general assumption that the meaning of a text can be established in an objective manner, but this assumption is more complicated than it may seem. The meaning intended by an ancient author can, at best, only be reconstructed tentatively, and few historical critics would deny that a text may take on new meanings in changing circumstances. (This is in fact the *raison d'être* of redaction criticism.) But historical critics usually assume a hierarchy of meanings and regard the historical context as basic or primary.

Historical criticism of the Bible developed primarily as an enterprise of Protestant Christianity, within the context of the Christian churches.¹⁰ While the Reformation encouraged Christians to read the Bible for themselves, and used it as a counterweight to Catholic tradition, it was not until the 18th century and the Enlightenment that biblical criticism began to emerge in its modern form, and it developed hand in hand with critical

8. James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32-58.

9. For a survey of these methods, see Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), esp. 11-99.

10. Emil G. Kræling, *The Old Testament since the Reformation* (New York: Harper, 1955). On Jewish reactions to "higher criticism," see Alan Cooper, "Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14-35. On the development of Catholic scholarship, see Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

historiography in the 19th.¹¹ The principles that guided this criticism were articulated most insightfully by the German theologian and sociologist of religion Ernst Troeltsch, whose views were later reformulated lucidly by Van Harvey.¹²

These principles included the *autonomy* of the historian. This principle is associated with the Enlightenment and especially with Immanuel Kant, although he certainly was not the first to conceive of it.¹³ As Harvey has well described it, autonomy represented a change in what may be called the morality of knowledge. Where medieval culture had celebrated belief as a virtue and regarded doubt as sin, the modern critical mentality regards doubt as a necessary step in the testing of knowledge and the will to believe as a threat to rational thought. In the context of biblical studies, autonomy meant first of all freedom from ecclesiastical authorities and heresy trials. In that narrow sense, the need for autonomy can hardly be questioned. But it also represented an ideal of judgment. In the words of the historian R. G. Collingwood, "so far from relying on an authority other than himself, to whose statements his thought must conform, the historian is his own authority."¹⁴ In this sense, autonomy is opposed not only to ecclesiastical interference but also to undue deference to received opinion. Biblical scholarship has not always been characterized by autonomy in the latter sense, although I doubt that many historical critics would dispute the principle!

A second principle of historical criticism is the *principle of analogy*.¹⁵ To understand the ancient context of a text requires some sympathetic

11. Robert Morgan, with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40-92. An account of these developments with a New Testament focus, from a conservative Christian perspective, can be found in Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: From Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 10-168.

12. Ernst Troeltsch, "Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie," *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), 2:729-53; "Historiography," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1914), 6:716-23; Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

13. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 286-92. See Harvey, 39-42.

14. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 236.

15. Harvey, 14-15; Krentz, 55-72.

analogy between ancient and modern situations. Indeed, one of the assumptions of historical criticism is that texts are human products and that human nature has not changed beyond recognition over the centuries. We can assess what is plausible in an ancient situation because we know what human beings are capable of. This principle gave rise to problems with regard to the miraculous aspects of the biblical stories, but it also provided a way of bringing the text to life by analogy with modern experiences.

A third principle of historical criticism is the *principle of criticism*.¹⁶ Scholarship is an ongoing process; its results are always provisional and never final. This is perhaps especially obvious in historical scholarship, where new evidence is constantly coming to light. The historian tries to establish the most probable account of the past, but absolute certainty is never available. Today's results may be overturned by tomorrow's excavation. This element of uncertainty in biblical scholarship has always been especially unsettling for church authorities and for traditional theologians, more so even than heretical conclusions, because it implies that anything we believe may be subject to revision in light of new evidence and undercuts any idea of unchangeable revealed truth.¹⁷

The original impact of historical criticism in the predominantly Christian contexts of Europe and North America was revolutionary. Robert Morgan has referred to "the death of Scripture" in this context, although the death throes continue to the present day.¹⁸ The impact was felt mainly in connection with the historical reliability of the biblical text. For many Christians, the belief that the text is inspired entailed a belief in its historical accuracy, and that belief is so deeply ingrained that the debate lingers on in various forms after two hundred years of historical criticism. Julius Wellhausen felt obliged to resign from a theological faculty.¹⁹ Scholars like W. Robertson Smith and Charles A. Briggs were subjected to

16. Harvey, 14-15.

17. See the summary and assessment of Troeltsch by Harrisville and Sundberg, 146-68.

18. Morgan, 44-61.

19. See Rudolf Snend, "Julius Wellhausen and His *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1-20. On 5 April 1882, he wrote to the Prussian Minister of Culture: "I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office" (6).

heresy trials.²⁰ In the United States, the Fundamentalist movement was in large part a reaction against historical criticism and the relativism that it implied.²¹ In the Roman Catholic Church, the Modernist movement embraced historical criticism but was condemned by the papacy.²² Nonetheless, by the early 20th century the point had been made, at least in the so-called mainline churches, that biblical texts did not necessarily always report historical events, or do so in ways that would satisfy modern criteria. The growing appreciation of literary genre and the publication of cognate literature from the ancient Near East were crucial factors in this development.²³ Christian theology, at least in its more liberal forms, reached an accommodation with historical criticism that acknowledged its validity, even if only within certain limits.

Conversely, biblical scholars often sought to reconcile their findings with traditional faith. This tendency was most obvious in the subfield of biblical theology and especially in the so-called biblical theology movement.²⁴ In the arena of history, this tendency can be seen in the enormously influential *A History of Israel* by John Bright, which scarcely questions the reliability of the biblical record, while buttressing it with a richly informative account of ancient Near Eastern history.²⁵ There were, of

20. On Robertson Smith see John W. Rogerson, "Smith, William Robertson (1846-94)," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:477-78; *The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain: Profiles of F. D. Maurice and William Robertson Smith*, JSOTSup 201 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995). On C. A. Briggs, see Max G. Rogers, "Briggs, Charles Augustus (1841-1913)," in Hayes, 1:138-39.

21. See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and, with a focus on the interpretation of Daniel, Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, "The Book of Truth: Daniel as Reliable Witness to Past and Future in the United States of America," in *Europa, Tausendjähriges Reich und Neue Welt: Zwei Jahrtausende Geschichte und Utopie in der Rezeption des Danielbuches*, ed. Mariano Delgado, Klaus Koch, and Edgar Marsch (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, and Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 385-404, esp. 395-400.

22. See Fogarty, 78-119.

23. In the Catholic Church, the encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), was a landmark in this respect. See C. Louis, O.S.B., ed., *Rome and the Study of the Scriptures: A Collection of Papal Enactments on the Study of Holy Scripture together with the Decisions of the Biblical Commission*, 7th ed. (St. Meinrad: Grail, 1962), 80-107.

24. See the classic account of Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13-87.

25. 4th ed., with an Introduction and Appendix by William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); originally published in 1959.

course, profound differences between the American biblical theology movement represented by people like George Ernest Wright, and the more subtle European "history of traditions" approach of Gerhard von Rad,²⁶ but the common ground was considerable. The Old Testament was viewed from a distinctly Christian perspective. The biblical history was affirmed as a history of salvation, even when its historical facticity was admitted to be in doubt. Ancient Israel was thought to be decisively different from its ancient Near Eastern environment, although that environment provided an essential context for interpretation. In this regard, biblical theology stood in sharp contrast to the history of religions approach of the "Myth and Ritual school."²⁷ But the dominant voices in biblical scholarship for much of the 20th century were generally subservient to the dominant voices in the biblical text. While historical details might be questioned, and great energy was expended on reconstructing the history of the biblical text, most biblical scholarship took place within the interpretive framework of Christian theology.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, however, that framework became increasingly problematic. We have witnessed what Leo Perdue has called "the collapse of history."²⁸ Even the assured results of earlier generations, such as the documentary hypothesis in Pentateuchal studies, are under fire.²⁹ New methods and approaches are sprouting up everywhere. The changes in the character of biblical studies were driven by two factors. On the one hand, there is what the archaeologist William Dever has called "the steady accumulation of empirical data."³⁰ Beginning in the 19th century, knowledge of the historical context of ancient Israel was transformed by the discovery of Akkadian and Egyptian texts. In the 20th century, the Ugaritic texts found at Ras Shamra in 1929 and the Dead Sea Scrolls have

26. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65).

27. The "Myth and Ritual" school was a broad movement in the study of religion. See the anthology, Robert A. Segal, ed., *The Myth and Ritual Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The application of this theory to biblical studies is illustrated by the contributions of S. H. Hooke (83-92) and Ivan Engnell (136-40).

28. Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: OBT* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

29. See Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

30. William G. Dever, "What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It?" in *Hesed ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs*, ed. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin. BJS 320 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 241-53 (249).

had a major impact on biblical interpretation. While the relevance of the nonbiblical material was obscured in the heyday of biblical theology, it could not be ignored forever, and neither could the sharp differentiation of Israel from its Near Eastern environment be maintained. More recently, archaeology has forced a serious revision of the received account of the origins of Israel. Of course, the new evidence is always subject to interpretation, and its interpretation is never final. But it is no longer possible to claim that independent, objective research supports the basic historicity of the biblical text. Whether archaeological research can be regarded as objective is another matter, but at least the foundations of biblical reliability can no longer be shored up from that quarter.

The existence and importance of empirical data can not be denied, but this is not the major factor in the changing face of biblical studies. Far more important is the changing demography of the field. Up to the 1960s, biblical studies was largely the preserve of white male Christian professors, largely Protestant. The *Sitz-im-Leben* was primarily the seminary or department of theology, or alternatively departments of Near Eastern studies. Beginning in the 1960s, this situation began to change. Catholics began to attain some prominence, and women entered the field in increasing numbers. Jewish scholars sought their training in secular or Christian universities. Racial and ethnic minorities became visible, even if not well represented. Many scholars found themselves teaching in departments of religious studies, with no confessional allegiance. All of these changes had an impact on the way biblical criticism was done. Feminist scholars pointed out the pervasive patriarchy in biblical texts. Jewish scholars uncovered Christian bias in supposedly objective scholarship. And some scholars found their closest colleagues in departments of literature or sociology rather than in theology or Near Eastern studies. It is in light of this new situation that the plethora of new approaches has arisen in biblical studies.

In light of this situation, we may well ask what two hundred years of historical criticism has achieved. We certainly have a lot of new evidence that improves our understanding of life in the ancient world,³¹ but the progress of the field as a whole can hardly be characterized as "the steady accumulation of empirical data." It is at least as much a matter of the pro-

31. See, e.g., Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

gressive shedding of certitude. This is perhaps most obvious in the area of history, but it is operative in other areas too. Ongoing criticism has tended to highlight the tensions and differences within the biblical texts. Consequently, it is difficult to regard the Bible, or just the Hebrew Bible, as a whole, as a coherent guide to life. Most fundamentally, cracks have begun to appear in the ethical values of the Bible, and questions are raised about the God that it portrays. All of this might be said to be entailed already in the morality of knowledge that underlies the discipline, which celebrates doubt as virtue and regards faith, in the sense of belief, with suspicion.³² Historical criticism has seldom, if ever, pushed its principles to their logical conclusion. But in view of the corrosive effect of Troeltsch's "principle of criticism," it is ironic that some recent writers have characterized historical criticism as a quest for "some kind of absolute truth."³³ Nothing could be further from the case.

There is another aspect of historical criticism that I should like to emphasize, and that seems to me to have been quite successful. It has created an arena where people with different faith commitments can work together and have meaningful conversations. The historical focus has been a way of getting distance from a text, of respecting its otherness. The neutrality and objectivity at which the discipline has aimed has allowed Jews and Christians to work together and has allowed feminists to make their case in ways that initially unsympathetic scholars have found compelling. The objectivity in question is not a matter of absolute truth. Rather, it is a matter of making an argument by appeal to assumptions and knowledge shared by the participants in a particular conversation, a quest for what might be called a "regional" truth. What historical criticism does is set limits to the conversation, by saying what a given text could or could not mean in the ancient context.³⁴ A text may have more than one possible meaning, but it cannot mean just anything at all. So, for example, the meaning of the Hebrew word *'almah* in Isaiah 7 is a question of Hebrew lexicography, to be settled by appeal not only to the literary context but to the use of the word in other settings. If Christians want to read the word as "virgin," and see the

32. Cf. the comments of F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Rethinking Historical Criticism," *BibInt* 7 (1999): 235-71, on the "historicist core" of historical criticism (245).

33. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7. See the comments of Barr, 32-40.

34. Cf. John Barton, "Historical-critical Approaches," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9-20 (17).

passage as a prophecy of Christ, they must at least recognize that this is a secondary meaning, which Jewish interpreters cannot be expected to share. The assumptions governing the conversation may change, and have demonstrably changed over the last two generations, as the circle of participants has widened. In this context, the truth claims of the discipline are relative. Assured results are those on which most people, for the moment, agree.³⁵ Scholarship is a conversation, in which the participants try to persuade each other by appeal to evidence and criteria that are in principle acceptable to the other participants.³⁶ This model of conversation has served the academy well and is not something that should be lightly abandoned.

Postmodernism

It is precisely this qualified objectivity, however, with its attempt to distance the text from the reader, that is called into question by some postmodern approaches to interpretation. Postmodernism, it should be said, is an even larger umbrella term than historical criticism, and it encompasses a wide range of approaches and methods that are not necessarily compatible with each other.³⁷ It has been said to cover everything "from punk rock to the death of metanarrative."³⁸ But like historical-critical approaches, postmodernist ones have a family resemblance. They rely heavily on a few poststructuralist French critics, such as Jacques Derrida and

35. Cf. Jürgen Habermas's ideal of rational society as "the communication community [*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*] of those affected, who as participants in a practical discourse test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are 'right'"; *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975), 105. Cf. also the "practical realism" endorsed by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 285; "its notion of truth emerges from a consensus of practitioners."

36. Cf. the comments of Dobbs-Allsopp, 260-61, on the need to persuade.

37. See George Aichele et al. (The Bible and Culture Collective), *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); "Post-modern Biblical Interpretation," in Hayes, *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* 2:305-9; ed., *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible*. On the diversity within postmodernism, note the caution of Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), XI.

38. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 21.

Michel Foucault, and some American literary critics such as Stanley Fish.³⁹ The following statement by Terry Eagleton provides, I think, a serviceable sketch of the phenomenon:

By "postmodern," I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most widely shared assumption of postmodernists is a rejection of "objectivity," or of the distinction between the subjective and the objective.⁴¹ In the Foucaultian strand of postmodernism, objectivity is no more than a pretense that masks the vested interests of the interpreter, and this view is also articulated very forcefully by Stanley Fish.⁴² If this is correct, and everyone has a power-seeking agenda, then it is better to have these agendas out in the open. Typically, postmodernists also deny that they are claiming absolute truth for their own positions, although in some cases this claim is difficult to reconcile with the vehemence of their rhetoric.⁴³ They are also suspicious of consensus, on the grounds that it suppresses minority views. Jean-François Lyotard, who adopts Wittgenstein's theory of language-games, calls for "a theory of games which accepts agonistics as a founding principle"⁴⁴ and objects that "consensus does vio-

39. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). Derrida and Foucault should not necessarily be held responsible for everyone who invokes their names. See the cautions of Yvonne Sherwood, "Introduction: Derrida's Bible," in *Derrida's Bible* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8-9; "Biblical Studies and Theology has its own supply of Derrida cartoons and pseudo-Derrida clones."

40. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 13.

41. Adam, "Post-modern Biblical Interpretation," 306.

42. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). For a recent example in biblical studies, see George Aichele, *Sign, Text, Scripture: Semiotics and the Bible*. Interventions 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 40.

43. Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 26: "For all its vaunted openness to the Other, postmodernism can be quite as exclusive and censorious as the orthodoxies it opposes." See also the nicely ironic comments of Robert P. Carroll, "Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism," in Barton, 58-59, on *The Postmodern Bible*.

44. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Theory

lence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension."⁴⁵ A similar Hobbesian, or even Machiavellian, philosophy is propounded by Fish⁴⁶ and advocated for biblical studies by David Clines.⁴⁷ Not all postmodernists are necessarily so agonistic, but much of this literature is characterized by what Yvonne Sherwood has called "the promotion of idiosyncrasy over communication,"⁴⁸ and this too militates against the quest for consensus.

Another common postmodernist assumption is that there is no univocal, unambiguous meaning. Any text is open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, reader response critics are wont to deny that a text has any meaning apart from the reader who "constructs" it.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Derrida's theory of deconstruction is text-based, but holds that every text contains elements that can undermine its meaning, like loose threads to be pulled by the deconstructionist critic.⁵⁰ To deconstruct a text is "to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies."⁵¹ Deconstruction, then, tends towards in-

and History of Literature 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 160. See also the preface to this volume by Frederic Jameson, which contrasts Lyotard's views with those of Habermas.

45. Lyotard, xxv.

46. See, e.g., *The Trouble with Principle*, 13.

47. David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*. JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 92-93: "It must be, once we admit that we are not all engaged in some objective quest for determinate meanings, and that our ideologies, our locations, our interests and our personalities determine our scholarship — and separate us from one another. . . there is a lot we don't like, don't approve of, and will not stand for, in our colleagues, a lot that has yet to be brought into the light, taken the measure of, and fought over."

48. Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective*. JSOTSup 212 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 163: "For many readers the promotion of idiosyncrasy over communication renders the 'classic' texts of deconstruction almost perversely inaccessible and ensures that they receive only limited circulation."

49. See *The Postmodern Bible*, 20-69.

50. A brief but helpful introduction to Derridean deconstruction can be found in Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 150-202. See also Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984), 105-26.

51. Jonathan D. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86.

determinacy of meaning.⁵² Historical critics may also appreciate ambiguity in texts, but often argue that one meaning is primary — either the author's intention or what the text would have meant in its original setting. Thorough-going postmodernists, in contrast, deny that there is any one primary meaning. In the words of A. K. M. Adam, they "suspect that any univocity is the product of an interpretive violence that suppresses ambiguity by a will to unity."⁵³

There is some range of attitudes among postmodern critics as to whether the text can be said to set limits to valid interpretation. Daniel Patte, in his book on *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, advocates a "multidimensional exegesis" which apparently regards all interpretations, scholarly and popular, as equally valid, so long as they are not absolutized.⁵⁴ *The Postmodern Bible*, in the chapter on reader response criticism, correctly characterizes the typical historical-critical view as one that holds that a text has a determinate core of meaning, but not necessarily only one correct meaning. In the view of the authors, however, the determinate core is itself determined by the critic's reading strategy. Yet in the same essay we read that "deconstructive reading relies necessarily on traditional historical criticism as 'an indispensable guardrail' or 'safeguard' for reading. If it were not so, Derrida cautions, 'one could say just anything at all.'"⁵⁵ Sherwood finds it impossible to dispense with some construct of text and author, because of "the sheer impossibility of telling a story of reading using the reader as the only protagonist."⁵⁶ Mieke Bal denies that interpretation can be text-based, but continues:

52. This tendency is often subject to criticism. See the scathing remarks of feminist critic Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(ter)s: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1992), 8: "Deconstruction is a certain masturbation with the text, playing with the terms at hand. Derrida demonstrates the careful, contingent manipulation of meanings and the endless deferral of sense." Obviously, deconstruction also admits of a more sympathetic description, as a careful and patient examination of the possibilities of a text.

53. Adam, "Post-modern Biblical Interpretation," 306.

54. Daniel Patte, *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995). See the review by William Schweiker in *JR* 76 (1996): 355-57.

55. *The Postmodern Bible*, 64, with reference to Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 141.

56. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 28. Cf. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 212-13.

The text is not an object upon which we can operate; it is another subject that speaks to us. We can listen, and just as in real life, we will hear our own voice reflected; yet we cannot attribute just anything to the other speaker. If we shout too loud, so that the other is reduced to silence, we will lack arguments to make our case. This is the point of rational argumentation, of the attempt to give evidence in the text while we do not believe interpretations can ever be truly based on it. It is not a matter of empirical proof; it is a matter of plausible interaction.⁵⁷

"The notion of Otherness," write "New Historicist" critics Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, "is essential to historicism, for the historical imagination exists only when one can conceive of a time, a place, a people, a culture different from ours, only when the past becomes something other than a mirror image of our concerns and interests."⁵⁸

Yet another assertion of at least some postmodernist critics is that time is not an essential consideration in meaning.⁵⁹ The fact that texts were composed long ago and in another place is not necessarily significant. Accordingly, postmodernists do not share the historical critic's dread of anachronism. Stephen Moore confesses, with disarming understatement, that "the avoidance of anachronism is not, perhaps, my strong suit as an exegete" as he proceeds to apply analogies from body-building to the biblical God.⁶⁰ Yvonne Sherwood speaks of "hurling all kinds of contemporary idioms/preoccupations — all kinds of ropes of analogy — out to the shores of the ancient text in the hope that they will form some kind of attachment and in the process rearrange and reanimate the over-familiarised text."⁶¹ Whether one finds these far-flung analogies illuminating, entertaining, annoying, or infuriating, depends, I suppose, on where one's brain has incubated or been pickled. Historical critics should have no objection in principle to analogies from any source. The question is how the analogies are used and what the issue is that is under consideration. Anachro-

57. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 240.

58. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, "The Historicist Enterprise," in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-38 (15). See further Dobbs-Allsopp, 265-66, who speaks of respect for the otherness of the text or of history as an ethical issue.

59. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* 305.

60. Moore, *God's Gym*, 123.

61. Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 291.

nism becomes a problem only in questions of historical meaning, and even then anachronistic analogies can still have heuristic value.

Some formulations of postmodernism are evidently more congenial to historical criticism than others.⁶² The kind of limitless possibilities envisioned by Patte's *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation* lead one to wonder why one should bother with criticism at all. As Robert Morgan put it, "A Bible that can mean anything means nothing."⁶³ Even if determinate meanings are determined by the critic's reading strategy, for meaningful communication to occur there is need of some basic consensus on the limits of valid interpretation, some shared sense of the text that constrains the free play of imagination. And, as Robert Alter has insisted, "The words of the text afford us at least a narrow strip of solid ground in the quagmire of indeterminacy, because the words a writer uses, despite the margin of ambiguity of some of them, have definite meanings, and no critic is free to invent meanings in order to sustain a reading."⁶⁴ A good deal of postmodernist commentary on the Bible seems to me to fall outside the range of what might reasonably be called exegesis, or to forgo concern for "plausible interaction" with the text. Virginia Burrus and Stephen Moore argue that Song 5:7, where the speaker reports that she was beaten by the sentinels, can validly be read as a sado-masochistic fantasy,⁶⁵ but they seem closer to the mark when they describe such an interpretation as "a blissful act of willful misreading."⁶⁶ Such writing may still be entertaining, stimu-

62. See the remarks of Fred W. Burnett, "Postmodern Biblical Exegesis: The Eve of Historical Criticism," *Semeia* 51 (1990): 51-80.

63. Morgan, 13. Cf. the objection of John Barton to "what looks like a refusal to accept that [the text] constrains the interpreter"; "Beliebbarkeit," in Sherwood, *Derrida's Bible*, 301. Sherwood insists that the reading of Derrida as promoting free play with the text is an "institutionalized misreading" which is "no less than catastrophic" (7).

64. Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 224.

65. Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore, "Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 11 (2003): 24-52 (49). There are many interesting and valid insights in this article into the interpretation of the Song, both ancient and modern. See also Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor*, 21-89.

66. Burrus and Moore, *BibInt* 11 (2003): 44. They adduce no hint from the text that the beating is perceived as pleasurable. The sexual interpretation of Burrus and Moore is mild compared to that of Roland Boer, "Night Sprinkle(s): Pornography and the Song of Songs," in *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 53-70; and "The Second Coming: Repetition and Insatiable Desire in the Song of Songs," *BibInt* 8 (2000): 276-301.

lating, and illuminating, but its concerns and objectives are different from those of exegetical scholarship, even on the broadest definition of the latter. "Texts trigger readings," writes Mieke Bal; "That is what they are: the occasion of a reaction."⁶⁷ But not every reaction triggered by a text can be regarded as a valid meaning or interpretation.

Again, to say that critics have agendas is hardly news. This is precisely why we need critical method, to arbitrate between them. The conflict of approaches may be viewed in ethical, or even political, terms. *The Postmodern Bible* correctly describes historical criticism, and most of First World academia, as a form of democratic pluralism that tries to regulate debate to resolve, or at least mitigate, conflicts of interpretation.⁶⁸ The postmodern vision of Lyotard or Fish, in contrast, posits irreconcilable language games, where the protagonists pursue their own interests in agonistic fashion. Personally, I would rather live in the pluralistic democracy, but admittedly the democracy works well only if due account is taken of the voices from the margins.

From the perspective of a democratic pluralist, however, there are still things to be learned from postmodern exegesis. Even when postmodern critics play by the rules of the game, so to speak, they often push the questions farther than traditional historical critics have been inclined to do. Broadly speaking, these questions are of two types. Deconstructive questions, in the spirit of Derrida, tend to undermine the truth claims of the biblical text, while ideological criticism, in the spirit of Foucault, raises problems about its moral status.

Deconstructive Reading

As an example of explicitly deconstructionist reading, we may consider the discussion of Hosea by Yvonne Sherwood.⁶⁹ I choose this example, from her dissertation, because of its methodological explicitness and clarity, although these very features make it somewhat atypical of the genre. Much of the better deconstructionist writing, including Sherwood's later work, is

67. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 132.

68. Cf. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 285: "pragmatism only works if democratic institutions are strong and functioning daily."

69. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 203-53.

more complex and enriched by intertextual allusions.⁷⁰ But this simpler example may illustrate the basic method more effectively for introductory purposes.

According to Sherwood, the rhetorical strategy of Hosea 1-2 can be reduced to three essential premises: 1. Israel was initially pure. 2. She betrayed YHWH by pursuit of Baal. 3. YHWH threatened Israel with rejection, but ultimately restored her to favor. In each of these premises "there is an implicit violent hierarchy, in which the first term is promoted as stronger, prior, superior and triumphant: 1. Innocence-Deviance (the pattern of 'The Fall'). 2. Yhwh-Baal. 3. Love-Hate (Acceptance-Rejection)." Sherwood claims that "traditionally, each hierarchy has been affirmed not only by the text but by the critical tradition that seeks to uphold it." She, in contrast, seeks to show how the hierarchies inevitably deconstruct, "because in this, as in all texts, what the author sees is systematically related to what he does not see."⁷¹

In Sherwood's reading, "the idea of a pure origin becomes the linchpin of the text's rhetoric."⁷² In Hos 2:5(3), "Yhwh equates the woman Israel with a naked baby and infantile innocence," and in 2:16-17(14-15) he talks of a future when Israel will respond "as in the days of her youth." This motif of original innocence appears again in Hosea 11, a text that Sherwood does not discuss. Yet, she claims, this argument is subverted by the imagery of Hosea's marriage, "for if Yhwh is claiming that Israel loved him and then betrayed him, this logical sequence is subverted by a metaphor in which the wife is already harlotrous at the point of marriage."⁷³ So, Yhwh's marriage metaphor, which is presumably designed to reinforce his position, also works against him. The marriage is contaminated by promiscuity from the beginning and there is no virgin bride.

I do not find this reading entirely convincing. One could, after all, take the "woman of harlotry" whom Hosea marries as one who is recognized as such in hindsight, or even if one supposes that she was already a prostitute

70. See, e.g., her essay with John D. Caputo, "Otobiographies, Or How a Torn and Disembodied Ear Hears a Promise of Death (A Rearranged Meeting between Yvonne Sherwood and John D. Caputo and the Book of Amos and Jacques Derrida)," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 209-39. Several good examples of Derridean readings can be found in Sherwood, *Derrida's Bible*.

71. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 207.

72. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 208.

73. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 210.

the symbolism need not be pressed to demand perfect correspondence. Neither, I think, is the argument of the text necessarily deconstructed by the inherent ambiguity of the imagery of the wilderness, which is at once a place of death and new beginning. It is precisely this ambiguity that gives this text its poetic richness. The idea that rebirth comes only through purging and destruction is inherent in the prophet's message.⁷⁴ This imagery is not "undecidable" in the sense of offering an impossible choice between two interpretations; both interpretations must clearly be held in tension. In this case, then, the deconstructive reading seems to me somewhat willful.⁷⁵

Sherwood is more successful, however, in her deconstruction of the other binary oppositions. The text presents a clear hierarchical contrast between Yahweh and Baal, and this hierarchy has often been endorsed, quite uncritically, by biblical scholarship. Our concern, for the present, is not whether this contrast does justice to Canaanite religion, but whether it is an adequate reading of Hosea. The seeds of deconstruction here lie in the fact that Yahweh and Baal seem to be perceived in very similar terms, as the lover who provides Israel with grain, wine, and oil. The question seems to be, which is the true fertility god? Many critics concede that Hosea is here "participating in Canaanizing in a certain sense."⁷⁶ It will not do to assert that "the Canaanite myth . . . is affirmed and dissolved at the same time."⁷⁷ It leaves an imprint on the portrayal of Yahweh that belies the stark contrast on which the prophet insists. Now it should be said that chapter 2 is not Hosea's last word on Yahweh. We get a rather fuller picture, for example, in chapter 4, where the people are indicted for swearing, lying and murder, stealing, adultery and bloodshed. Baal was not, to our knowl-

74. See the more traditional literary reading of Hosea 2 by Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 31-63.

75. Similarly, the argument of Clines, 67, that the oracle on Zerubbabel in Hag 2:20-23, in a book primarily concerned with the rebuilding of the temple, has a deconstructive effect, since "the reader experiences an aporia over what should be designated the overall theme of the work," seems to me to create an artificial problem.

76. Anton Wessels, "Biblical Presuppositions for and against Syncretism," in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerold Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fierhout, and Wessels. *Currents of Encounter* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 52-65 (60).

77. Harold Fisch, "Hosea: A Poetics of Violence," in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 136-57 (148).

edge, a god who made moral demands of his worshippers, although we should not be too quick to suppose that they, or any other ancient people, condoned murder and stealing. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Sherwood makes a valuable point here, that historical critics should be, and increasingly are, ready to grant. Yahweh and Baal are not as sharply different as traditional readings of Hosea have often implied. She also makes a valuable point in highlighting the tendency of many historical critics to defend the values of the biblical text.⁷⁸ This latter tendency, it seems to me, does not arise from historical criticism as such, but rather from the residual piety of its practitioners, who can sometimes be accused, like the friends of Job, of "speaking falsely for God" (Job 13:7). (Incidentally, this tendency is by no means peculiar to historical critics. Derrida waxes romantic about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as "the absolute religious experience, if there is such a thing: the pure act of faith, the asymmetrical obedience to an absurd order, an unintelligible order, an order that is beyond ethics and knowledge," although he recognizes that Abraham's action is criminal in ethical terms.⁷⁹ The actions of the terrorists on September 11, 2001, were equally acts of obedience to an order beyond ethics and knowledge, and who is to say that they were not acts of faith? But the case of Abraham is treated differently because of its biblical status.⁸⁰)

Deconstructionist reading is also successful in casting the renewal of the relationship between Yahweh and Baal in a new light. Two of Hosea's children are given the incredibly harsh names of Lo-ruhamah ("not pitied," or even "unloved"), and Lo-ammi ("not my people"). At the end of chapter 2, however, Yahweh says, "I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'you are my people.'" Harold Fisch argues that each name contained from the beginning the "trace" of its opposite, so that the negative names are unstable from the beginning.⁸¹ Sherwood astutely ob-

78. This tendency is repeatedly criticized by Cline, *Interested Parties*.

79. Jacques Derrida in "Époché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Sherwood and Hart, 27-50 (35). Derrida reflects on the story of Abraham at greater length (in a Kierkegaardian vein) in *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

80. See my essay, "Faith Without Works: Biblical Ethics and the Sacrifice of Isaac," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Gestalt und Wirkung*. Festschrift Horst Seebass, ed. Stefan Beyerle, Günther Mayer, and Hans Strauss (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), 115-31.

81. So Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 239. She does not specify the reference.

serves that each positive name, no less than the negative, is "haunted by its contrary."⁸² Israel may reasonably wonder whether its restoration is in any way definitive. We may compare the restoration of Job, who seems to get back everything he had lost and more, but who must live henceforth with the knowledge that everything could be wiped out again in one bad day. Moreover, the fragile, unstable nature of the restoration is not just a product of the postmodern imagination. Sherwood cites the *Pesikta of Rab Kahana*, which juxtaposes Hos 14:6 (Eng. 5) ("henceforth I will be as the dew to Israel") and 9:16 ("Ephraim is smitten, their root is dried up") and asks, "which words am I to believe, yesterday's or today's?"⁸³ Or again in Hos 11:8-9, Yahweh declares passionately that his compassion grows warm and tender and so he will not again destroy Ephraim, for he is "God and not man," only to declare two chapters later that "compassion is hid from my eyes" and that "Samaria shall bear her guilt" (13:14, 16). If one believes in revelation in history, it would seem that the latter sentiment prevailed. Sherwood accuses modern critics of repeating one of the faults of which Israel is accused: "the complacent assumption that the people of God are loved."⁸⁴

One can cavil with some aspects of Sherwood's analysis. Her eagerness to deconstruct occasionally leads to a forced or unreasonable reading of the text. She also dallies with the temptation to portray Hosea as a deconstructionist.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, I feel that my own reading of the opening chapters of Hosea is sharpened and enriched by Sherwood's discussion.⁸⁶ Insofar as her deconstructionist interpretation consists of a close reading of the text, with an eye for its inner tensions and contradictions, I do not see why any historical critic should object to it.⁸⁷ In fact, historical

82. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 239.

83. *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 295, cited by Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 240.

84. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 241.

85. This tendency is also in evidence in Sherwood and Caputo, 211, with reference to Amos.

86. Similarly, David J. A. Clines makes some valuable observations in his essay on "Haggai's Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed, and Reconstructed," in *Interested Parties*, 46-75. There are tensions in the text as to whether the rebuilding of the temple is sufficient to bring about the return of the divine glory, and as to whether a people whose works are impure can properly build the temple.

87. The affinities of Derridean deconstruction with rabbinic midrash were noted already by Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation*.

criticism arose to a great extent through precisely such readings. For a long time the tendency of historical critics was to resolve the tensions of the text with a redactional scalpel. I think source criticism is a necessary tool in the critic's toolbox, but most biblical scholars nowadays would agree that it has been used far too hastily in the past. We are all slowly learning to respect the fact that ancient authors did not necessarily see contradictions where we do, and that tensions and contradictions can be found in the writings of most authors, ancient and modern.

Sherwood's analysis, of course, is not just a close reading in the "new critical" sense. She is specifically looking for things that go against the grain of the usual interpretation of the text and that resist our impulse to harmonize and make coherent.⁸⁸ Sometimes she strains in this effort, but on the whole it is enlightening. Hosea, after all, was not a "logocentric" systematic theologian, but a prophet, who said one thing one day and something else the next. Coherence was not his biggest concern, and despite the best efforts of some canon-oriented interpreters, it does not seem to have been a major concern of the editors either. Consequently, when we look at this text from a distance it is inevitable that we see things of which the ancient authors were not aware.

The cases where Sherwood's interpretation seems most sharply disjunctive from older scholarship are those that involve theological judgments. The great bulk of historical critics have affirmed the prophet's denunciations of Baal and accepted his assurances of restoration without question. These judgments do not follow from any principles of historical criticism. Arguably, they represent failure to apply the principles of historical criticism consistently. There is something to be said, then, for Stephen Moore's characterization of postmodern exegesis as the "id" of historical criticism, the probing of its darker implications that traditional historical critics have preferred to avoid.⁸⁹

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge posed by deconstruction to traditional biblical exegesis, however, is expressed by Sherwood in a summary comment on Derrida's essay on the tower of Babel: "Derrida treats

tion in *Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 163-78 ("Reb Derrida's Scripture").

88. Cf. the methodological remarks of Mieke Bal in *Death and Dissymmetry*, 16-18, on "reading with a 'countercoherence'": "A countercoherence relates the 'official' reading to what it leaves out . . . It relates everything that is denied importance to the motivations for such denials."

89. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, 117.

Yhwh, as most literary critics do, not as an entity but as a construct of the text."⁹⁰ Again, there is no reason why a historical critic should object. The whole drift of historical criticism has been away from the view that the Bible is a timeless revelation of God, and an insistence that its writings are time-conditioned products of human authors, and that its wisdom, to adapt a phrase of Stanley Fish, is "of an age and not for all time," at least not in all cases.⁹¹ But the authoritative claims of biblical revelation are hard to resist. Sherwood herself continues, with obvious approval, to declare that Derrida's Yahweh is God of Babel, master of dispersal and confusion, resistant to univocality and union.⁹² Should we infer that this is, after all, the true God, and that we should make our pilgrimages to the shrine of St. Jacques⁹³ (de Paris, not Compostela)?⁹⁴ Or should we draw the more radical conclusion that the God of the Bible is not only not the God of the philosophers but is not necessarily a reliable representation of ultimate reality at all?

90. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 200.

91. Fish, 46. Fish would not, I think, accept the qualification, "not in all cases."

92. Derrida famously declared that he does "quite rightly pass for an atheist," in "Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases," in *Jacques Derrida*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington and Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155-56, but later said, in an interview with John Caputo, "I know that I've given a number of signs of my being a nonbeliever in God in a certain way, of being an atheist. Nevertheless, although I confirm that it is right to say that I am an atheist, I can't say, myself, 'I am an atheist' . . . I wouldn't say, 'I am an atheist' and I wouldn't say, 'I am a believer,' either" (Sherwood and Hart, 47). In the same interview, he says that "God could not be the omnipotent first cause, the prime mover, absolute being, or absolute presence. . . . God is far beyond any given existence; he has transcended any form of being. . . . On the other hand, God has an essential link to being named, being called, being addressed. When I use the word 'God,' I mention it. It is a word that I receive as a word with no visible experience or referent" (37). There have been many attempts to view Derrida as a proponent of "negative theology." See esp. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Richard Kearney, in contrast, argues that "in the heel of the hunt, [Derrida] prefers ghosts to gods. He prefers, as is his wont and right, to leave matters open"; "Deconstruction, God and the Possible," in Sherwood and Hart, 304. See further the detailed study of Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). According to de Vries, "Derrida's writings exhibit the paradox of a nontheological, and, it would seem, even nonreligious, concern with religion" (i-ix).

93. Sherwood is careful to insist that she is not "absurdly proclaiming Derrida as Messiah"; *Derrida's Bible*, 1.

94. The opening of Hosea is evoked in the film, "The Milky Way," by Luis Bunuel (1967), when a beggar on his way to Compostela encounters a mysterious man who tells him to "take unto thyself a wife of harlotry."

Ideological Criticism

As an example of ideological criticism, we may consider David Clines's book, *Interested Parties*, and specifically his essay, "Metacommentating Amos."⁹⁵ Like Sherwood, Clines reads against the grain of the text, a procedure that he describes as "reading from left to right" (whereas Hebrew is read from right to left).⁹⁶ Clines, however, has a more distinctly ethical focus, and is concerned with ideology as "the kind of large-scale ideas that influence and determine the whole outlook of groups of people."⁹⁷ It is not unusual, of course, to find critiques of the ideology of some parts of the biblical corpus in historical-critical scholarship. The royal ideology has often come in for criticism by liberal or leftist critics. Nowadays there is increased sensitivity to the ideology of the conquest narratives. But nearly all biblical scholars find some parts of the canonical corpus to be morally above criticism. The Ten Commandments are one such segment, and the book of Amos is another. In good postmodern fashion, Clines pushes the critique in precisely these areas.⁹⁸ In the case of the Ten Commandments, he disputes the common assumption that these are timeless ethical maxims and asks repeatedly whose interests are being served. The presumed addressees are married male Israelite property-owners.⁹⁹ Women are not addressed. The people whose interests are served by having "a text telling these pillars of society what they should and shouldn't do, in the name of Yahweh" are "the fathers of those addressed, that is, the old men of the society . . . whose interests are represented in every one of the commandments."¹⁰⁰ Whether or not one agrees with that analysis, Clines's main point is that the commandments do not serve the interests of all members of a society equally.

In the case of Amos, Clines's critique has more substantive bite. With regard to the prophet's scathing critique of the rich in Amos 6:4-7, he asks: "Is there some sin in having expensive ivory inlays on your bedframe? . . . And as for singing idle songs, who among the readers of Amos can cast a stone? Has karaoke suddenly become a sin, as well as a social disease?"¹⁰¹

95. Pp. 76-93.

96. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 20.

97. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 11.

98. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 26-45 (the Ten Commandments), 76-93 (Amos).

99. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 33.

100. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 35.

101. Clines, "Metacommentating Amos," 78-79.

Above all, are we really to accept the prophet's claim that the destruction of Israel was fit punishment for social inequities and reflected the will of Yahweh rather than the contingencies of the balance of power in the ancient Near East? Commentators, says Clines, fail to notice the injustice of the indiscriminate punishment inflicted by Amos's God, or "that Yahweh can't be very compassionate to the poor if he intends them to be carried into exile because of the wrongdoing of their leaders, or that the prophet's demand for justice does not seem to apply to the deity."¹⁰²

All of this, it seems to me, can be construed as pushing historical criticism to its logical conclusions, in a way that historical critics have traditionally failed to do. The skepticism and suspicion that Clines directs towards the biblical text are the analogue of the suspicion of contemporary philosophers towards Enlightenment ideals, or towards any ideals for that matter.¹⁰³ Because of its canonical status, the Bible has often enjoyed a presumption of transcendent value, even if that value is not distributed equally in all its parts. Clines is surely right that such a presumption has no place in critical scholarship. This is not to endorse the opposite assumption, that the Bible has no enduring value, but to hold biblical scholars responsible for the ethical implications of their interpretation. As he asks in another essay, "What ethical responsibility do I carry if I go on helping this text to stay alive?"¹⁰⁴

But radical relativism also has its dangers. At the end of his essay on the Ten Commandments, Clines asks facetiously, "Is there a chance that an analysis like the present one, that focuses on the sectional interests they support, will demythologize them — without at the same time bringing western civilization tumbling?"¹⁰⁵ But such a critique does in fact raise fundamental questions about the foundations (if any) of morality and the continued viability of any biblical theology. We shall return to these questions in the final chapter of this book after we have examined some developments in recent biblical criticism in more detail.

102. Clines, "Metacommentating Amos," 91.

103. E.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

104. Clines, "The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies," in *Auguries: The Jubilee Volume of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies*, ed. Clines and Stephen D. Moore. JSOTSup 269 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 286.

105. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 44-45.

The Believer and the Historian

Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation

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Christian theology can best address the conundrum of "Faith and History" by reclaiming a distinctively theological approach to understanding the Bible and the history with which it is concerned.

The question we have been asked to address is "How is history relevant to the work of biblical interpretation in theology?" I admit that when I first received notice of this topic, I was tempted to respond in the words of St. Paul, "Greatly in every way!" and let it go at that. For I suppose that if we were to summarize everything that we have learned on the topic of faith and history over the last few generations, we could do so in just two sentences: "Christianity is a historical faith," and "It is hard to say just what that means." Still, a glance through the bookstores shows that popular interest in matters of faith, history, and the Bible is as lively today as ever. A more thorough airing of the issue is clearly in order. For simplicity's sake, we begin with our two summary sentences.

Christianity is a historical faith. However weary we may be of this hackneyed affirmation, it has one distinct advantage: it is true beyond all reasonable doubt. We need only consult the opening and closing chapters of the church's holy scriptures, which encompass the whole of created reality in a vast sweep from creation to consummation, from "In the beginning" to "Behold, I make all things new!" Or again, we need only recall the centrality the creeds assign to certain events: incarnation, crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, and resurrection on the third day according to the scriptures.

But of course these considerations simply point us toward the crux of our problem. We can assume that the affirmation "Christianity is a historical faith" is true in some sense. But what do we mean by history? And how is the history with which Christian faith is concerned rightly to be known? These are the decisive questions at stake in the modern debate

about "faith and history." How we answer them will determine the way in which we respond to the specific question posed above.

The term "history" is used in a variety of ways. Let me distinguish four senses. First, we use the term to designate past events as they truly happened, which would in principle supply the standard for our efforts to understand and reconstruct those events. Second, history can refer to the tide of public events and circumstances that shape a given epoch and that test a given person or community's character, foresight, and wisdom. We say, for example, that Rosa Parks or the Polish dockworkers were thrust upon the stage of history. Third, history refers to the academic or scholarly discipline that historians pursue in their reconstruction of the past. For the last two hundred years, history in this sense has become a highly specialized and self-consciously modern discipline, famously represented in theological circles by the methods and procedures known as historical criticism. Fourth, we use the term to refer to the kind of books and articles that historians produce and publish about the past, such as John Bright's *A History of Israel*.¹

When we say that Christianity is a historical faith, we chiefly mean history in something like the first two senses. Christian faith, and the biblical testimony from which it stems, is concerned with the truth and reality of events as they actually transpire. Christian faith affirms that Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised again, and it would make a difference if these events could be shown never to have happened. In addition, Christian faith is surely concerned with "the signs of the times" and with being able to read and respond to them appropriately. A contemporary example of history in this latter sense has been the drastic and profound reevaluation of the churches' traditional teaching with respect to the Jewish people, a reevaluation occasioned in part by Christian recognition of complicity in the events that led to the Shoah.

Yet the modern problem known as "faith and history" concerns not only history in these first two senses but also history in the last two, as books and articles about the past written by modern historiographers. Because Christians have always been concerned with history in the sense of the truth and significance of events, *modern* Christians must be prepared to understand scripture and the events to which it testifies using the methods of modern historical research. Furthermore, they must be ready to trim the sails of faith in accordance with the results of such research. They must not interpret the Bible in ways inconsistent with the original sense of scripture, or make affirmations about past events unsupported by historical evidence. In sum, modern historiography provides Christian faith with access to the Bible and to the history to which the Bible gives witness.

Perhaps the most impressive statement of this position is found in Van A. Harvey's *The*

¹J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). A similar list of the senses of "history" is found in A. K. M. Adam's valuable book, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995) 155.