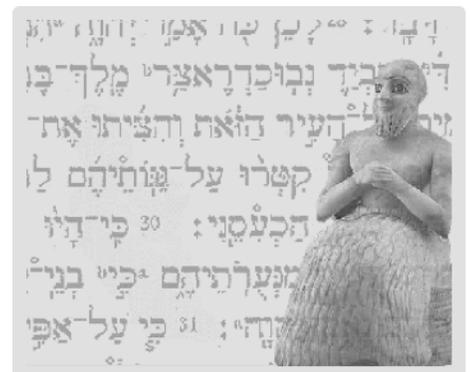


## Empirical Models of Textual Growth: A Challenge for the Historical-Critical Tradition

JOSHUA BERMAN



# EMPIRICAL MODELS OF TEXTUAL GROWTH: A CHALLENGE FOR THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL TRADITION\*

JOSHUA BERMAN  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

The last decade has witnessed a development in the practice of the historical critical paradigm in biblical studies. For the better part of two-hundred years, the textual growth of the Hebrew scriptures was predicated on the examination of internal clues, such as discontinuities and irregularities within the texts themselves. Scholars saw these literary phenomena as signs of diachronic growth and adduced hypotheses to explain how the text came to the final state in which it is received today. But more recently scholars have begun looking toward empirical models of textual growth to reconstruct the development of the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Rather than focusing exclusively on irregularities within the received text, these scholars have sought out empirical examples of documented textual growth from the epigraphic record of the ancient Near East. They have done so to probe how scribes amended and edited texts in the creation of new versions and in the creation of entirely new works. In light of the methodological impasse gripping the field, its extreme fragmentation and seemingly unbridgeable diversity, the pivot toward empirical models for textual development would

---

\* An earlier draft of this study was presented at the conference “Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch,” Andrews University, April 2016.

<sup>1</sup> K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); D.M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); J. Pakkala, *God’s Word Omitted: Omissions in the Transmission of the Hebrew Bible* (FRLANT, 251; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); M. Zahn, “Reexamining Empirical Models: The Case of Exodus 13,” in E. Otto and R. Achenbach (eds.), *Das Deuteronomium zwischen Pentateuch und deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 33–56; S.L. Sanders, “Can Empirical Models Explain What is Different about the Pentateuch?,” in B.B. Schmidt (ed.), *Contextualizing Israel’s Sacred Writing* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 281–304. See now also, R.F. Person and R. Rezetko (eds.), *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

seem a welcome and important development. We have no copies of biblical texts in hand that date from the biblical period itself, and thus can only adduce our compositional theories by working backwards from the received text. In looking beyond the Hebrew scriptures to the epigraphic corpus of the ancient Near East, we multiply the data from which to adduce theories of textual development. When biblicists hypothesize theories of textual development, they do so situated in a distinctly modern textual culture and are prone to project anachronistic attitudes and practices upon cultures at a great distance in time and place. Empirical models offer us methodological control as we observe how ancient scribes more closely contemporaneous with the scribes of Israel edited and expanded cherished texts across the centuries. Canvassing the textual culture of the ancient Near East affords us an awareness of the limitations of our own situatedness: we become aware of authorial and editorial practices at a great remove from our own, and that sometimes even seem to us counterintuitive.

The pivot to empirical models would seem to be not only important, but overdue. The texts whose growth has been documented—the Gilgamesh epic, the Temple Scroll, the Atrahasis story, and the Etana Epic, are texts that have been the subject of scholarly attention for more than half a century.<sup>2</sup> Comparative method has fruitfully mined these texts' concepts, institutions, style and language for the light they shed on biblical literature. Curiously, it is only recently that scholars have turned to the compositional history of these texts with an eye toward elucidating the textual growth of the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

In May of 2013, the Israel Institute for Advanced Study in Jerusalem sponsored a conference rightly billed as the largest meeting ever assembled to explore the mechanics of the textual growth of the Pentateuch.<sup>4</sup> Some of the speakers invoked empirical

---

<sup>2</sup> On the Gilgamesh Epic, see A. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); On the Temple Scroll, see M.O. Wise, *A Critical Study of the Temple Scroll from Qumran Cave 11* (SAOC, 49; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1990); On Atrahasis, see W.G. Lambert, A.R. Millard, and M. Civil (eds.), *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999); On the Etana Epic, see J.V.K. Wilson, *Studia Etanaica: New Texts and Discussions* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The notable exception to this lacuna is J.H. Tigay, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> “Convergence and Divergence in Pentateuchal Theory: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Israel, North America, and Europe.” International Conference convened at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem, May 12–13, 2013. Organizers: Bernard M. Levinson, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz. The conference volume has recently been published as J.C. Gertz et al. (eds.), *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America* (Tübingen:

models based upon the textual growth witnessed in the neighboring cultures of the ancient Near East.<sup>5</sup> In the discussion that ensued, opinion was split concerning the place that such approaches should take in developing theories for the growth of biblical texts. While some viewed these approaches as a welcome and even necessary corrective, other scholars—particularly those who work with more customary methods—were more circumspect.<sup>6</sup> It may well be that in any field of inquiry, new methods will be viewed as a threat by those who have long practiced and published according to the older and accepted canons of convention. I maintain that the lateness of this pivot toward empirical models and its luke-warm reception in some quarters even now are not accidental. Rather, deeply rooted intellectual commitments within the history of the diachronic study of the Bible explain why this development is such a late one, and why it poses a challenge for many who study and write about the growth of biblical texts.

In this work I conduct a critical intellectual history of the historical-critical paradigm in biblical studies, with particular regard to theories of development of the biblical text. My interest is to understand the origins of the intellectual commitments that shape the discipline today and its disposition toward empirical models of textual growth. I shall examine how theorists over three centuries have entertained the most fundamental questions: what is the goal of the historical critical study of the Hebrew Bible? What is the probative value of evidence internal within the text itself relative to evidence from external sources? What is the role of intuition in the scholar's work? What is the role of methodological control? As we shall see, scholars in different ages offered very different answers to these questions, answers colored by the prevailing intellectual milieu of their respective times.

I proceed by surveying the intellectual currents during the formative period of the discipline, the two centuries between Spinoza and Wellhausen. Surveys of the historical-critical method often view nineteenth century scholars as the heirs of Spinoza.<sup>7</sup> Yet, we shall see that the axioms that governed nineteenth century

---

Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See Gertz et al., *Formation of the Pentateuch*, the papers included in Section 1, "Empirical Perspectives on the Composition of the Pentateuch."

<sup>6</sup> Of course, some ancient Near Eastern compositional techniques, such as resumptive repetition, or *Wiederaufnahme*, have long been recognized within the source-critical literature. See M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 86; J.H. Tigay, "The Evolution of the Pentateuchal Narratives in Light of the Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic," in idem, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 21–52.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 14; B.T. Arnold, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.

German scholarship were at a great divide from those that governed earlier historical-critical scholarship. We shall see further, that these axioms were based in intellectual currents that were particular to the nineteenth century and especially so in Germany. From there, I offer a brief summary of the claims of contemporary scholars who are looking toward empirical models to reconstruct the textual development of Hebrew scriptures. I conclude by demonstrating how this vein of scholarship undermines an array of nineteenth century intellectual assumptions, but would have been quite at home in the earlier periods of the discipline's history. My hope is that this survey will stimulate a new self-awareness among scholars investigating these issues today.

### **METHODOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL PARADIGM IN BIBLICAL STUDIES**

Spinoza's comments in the seventh chapter of his *Theological-Political Treatise* are rightly cited as a seminal point in the development of historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible. Spinoza was the first to articulate a program of inquiry for the historical criticism of the Bible:

Our historical inquiry must explain the circumstances of all the books of the prophets whose memory has come down to us: the life, character and particular interests of the author of each individual book, who exactly he was, on what occasion he wrote, for whom and in what language. Then the fate of each book: namely how it was first received and whose hands it came into, how many variant readings there have been of its text, by whose decision it was received among the sacred books . . . all this I contend, has to be dealt with in a history of the Bible. It is important to know the life, character and concerns of each writer . . . it is also crucial to know on what occasion, at what time and for what people or age the various texts were written . . . It is essential finally to know all the other things mentioned above, so that apart from the question of authorship, we may also discover, for each book, whether it may have been contaminated with spurious passages or not; whether mistakes have crept in, and whether the mistakes have been corrected by unskilled or untrustworthy hands . . . We must acknowledge exclusively what is certain and unquestionable.<sup>8</sup>

Three-and-a-half centuries later, most diachronic scholars today could happily sign on to Spinoza's research agenda. The questions he raises are those that scholars of the historical-critical school

---

<sup>8</sup> Translation taken from J. Israel, *Spinoza: Theological Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101–2.

have grappled with ever since. However, in another, longer section of that chapter, Spinoza sounds a note not often heard today among biblicists engaged in diachronic research:

I must now therefore point out the limitations and difficulties in this method's capacity to guide us towards a full and certain knowledge of the sacred books . . . A further problem with this method is this requires a history of the vicissitudes of all the biblical books, and most of this is unknown to us. For either we have no knowledge whatever of the authors or (if you prefer) the compilers, of many of the books-or else we are uncertain about them, as I will demonstrate fully in the next chapters. Also, we do not know under what circumstances these books whose compilers are unknown were composed or when. Nor do we know into whose hands all these books subsequently came, or in whose copies so many variant readings occur . . . if we do not know its author or when and under what circumstances he wrote it, our efforts to get at its true sense will be fruitless. For if all this is unknown, we cannot ascertain what the author intended or might have intended.

All these, then, are the difficulties of this method of interpreting Scripture on the basis of its own history which I undertook to describe. I think these difficulties are so great that I do not hesitate to affirm that in numerous passages either we do not know the true sense of Scripture or can only guess at it without any assurance.<sup>9</sup>

While many diachronic scholars today would agree with Spinoza's research program referenced above, few would share in the pessimism he expresses concerning our capacity to answer those very same questions. Note also that Spinoza identifies here "the limitations and difficulties in this method's capacity to guide us towards a *full and certain knowledge*." This very high bar of evidence matches his earlier instruction (at the end of the earlier cited passage), "we must acknowledge exclusively what is certain and unquestionable." Hypotheses proliferate today concerning the dates and compositional histories of the various biblical texts. While many scholars would say that their respective theories are well-founded, few would insist that their proposals are "certain and unquestionable." Put differently, scholarship today implicitly operates with two foundational assumptions putting itself at a distance from Spinoza. Scholars today have more confidence than did Spinoza that we can indeed trace the compositional history of the biblical texts. Second, scholars today are prepared to assign probative value to suggestive evidence, and do not insist upon admitting proposals that are "certain and unquestionable."

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 106–10.

The skepticism that animates Spinoza's writings concerning the potential for historical-critical analysis of the Hebrew Bible is seen again a decade later in the work of the Frenchman Father Richard Simon, the most learned biblicist of his day. Like Spinoza, Simon points to fissures and discontinuities within the biblical text, and like Spinoza, Simon understands that human hands, historically situated, stand behind the creation of the sacred texts. And yet, commenting on the history of the received texts he cautions:

What we have at present is but an abridgement of the ancient records, which were much larger, and that those who made the abridgements had particular reasons which we cannot understand. It is better therefore to be silent in this subject and to keep to the general reasons we have related than to search farther into this matter, and condemn by a rash criticism what we do not understand . . . I believe it is unnecessary to inquire with too much niceness the particular authors of each Book, because we can make but very uncertain conjectures.<sup>10</sup>

Spinoza and Simon established the basic questions that historical criticism asks of the texts today. Yet, at the same time, Spinoza and Simon are at great remove from later proponents and supposed heirs of their method. Neither of them attempts to decompose any existing text into its original component parts, be they sources, or fragments. Neither attempts to explain the motives that might have contributed to any of these supposed components. Neither proposes a chronology of these components. We must recognize that they offered no solutions to these critical questions not because they thought them unimportant—indeed, they both claim that these questions are of the utmost importance to arrive at a true understanding of Scripture. They offered no solutions to these questions because they were convinced that we do not have the data to answer them, certainly, if the criterion for admissible solutions is, as Spinoza writes, “exclusively what is certain and unquestionable.”

### **EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CONFIDENCE AND THE WORK OF JEAN ASTRUC**

Scholars of the eighteenth century, like their predecessors in the seventeenth, arrived at their conclusions concerning the composition of the Hebrew scriptures solely on the basis of their reading of the Hebrew Bible, without recourse to external texts. The evidence available to scholars across this time does not change. But the culture does. The scholars that continue the historical-critical paradigm after Spinoza and Simon do so not by building upon and expanding the findings of their predecessors, but by bringing the

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Simon, *A Critical History of the Old Testament* (London: Walter Davis, 1682), 27, 29.

sensitivities and intellectual commitments of their age into their reading of the self-same texts that earlier scholars had access to as well.

Just five years after Richard Simon penned his *Critical History of the Old Testament*, Sir Isaac Newton published his 1687 *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, which formulated the laws of motion and universal gravitation. Newton's work had a profound impact on eighteenth century thought. Previously, nature was largely considered unpredictable and impenetrable. Newton's work proffered an understanding of nature as a well-ordered realm subject to laws that could be expressed elegantly and succinctly through mathematical formulae. Most importantly, nature was now considered open to human observation as never before. This paradigm shift would influence all realms of inquiry. Eighteenth century thinkers sought to match this science of nature with a science of human nature. Just as in the natural world, the world of the affairs of men, it was thought, must also be orderly, and subject to laws. And these areas of inquiry, no less than the natural world, were open to human observation and comprehension.<sup>11</sup> There emerged an attitude of confidence in the competence of human understanding. What dominated the age was the *libido scienti*, the lust for knowledge. Theological dogmatism of a previous age had branded such enquiry as intellectual pride, as the cosmos contained secrets which only the Almighty could know. But in this new age this was considered a necessary quality of the soul. In the words Ernst Cassirer: "The defense, reinforcement, and consolidation of this way of thinking is the cardinal aim of eighteenth century culture."<sup>12</sup>

One tenet of Enlightenment thought, in the eighteenth century and beyond, was the notion that science consists of analysis, of the dissection of a phenomenon into its constituent parts.<sup>13</sup> Landmark advances had been made through this notion in the natural sciences. Organisms that seemed whole to the naked eye were discovered to be comprised of cells. The first cells had been witnessed under a microscope in 1665, ultimately leading to cell theory in the 1830's. John Dalton published the first periodic table of the elements in 1803. For the enlightenment mind, writes Ernst Cassirer, reason mandates that events and phenomena be analyzed and reduced to their constituent parts.<sup>14</sup>

This provides the backdrop for the contribution to historical criticism of the Bible of Frenchman Jean Astruc, in his 1753 work,

---

<sup>11</sup> See C. Fox, R. Porter, and R. Wolker (eds.), *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 14.

<sup>13</sup> F.C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12; J.H. Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 467.

<sup>14</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 10, 13; Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 12.

*Conjectures sur les Mémoires Originaux*. Astruc is rightly known as the father of the documentary hypothesis of the composition of the Pentateuch. He believed that Genesis had been weaved from two main and ten minor sources which he parsed out into four columns on the basis of divine names and narrative unity.<sup>15</sup> To appreciate his work, one must understand Astruc's biography as a product of the scientific revolution of his age. The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a period during which both science and the Bible were regarded with the greatest of respect and as standing in complete accord. The knowledge of science could aid in the interpretation of scripture, and knowledge of scripture could assist in the understanding of science.<sup>16</sup> Astruc was a gynecologist by profession and wrote actively within his field.<sup>17</sup> Astruc describes his methodology in programmatic and scientific fashion:

It was only natural to make an attempt to take the First Book of Moses apart (*decomposer*), to separate all the various mixed up pieces, to put back together those that were of the same kind and in all probability belonged to the same account and thus to bring those original accounts, which I believe Moses had at his disposal, back into their original order. This task was not as difficult as one might have thought; it was just a question of putting together all the pieces in which God is always called Elohim. I set them in a column that I called A, and I considered them to be bits and pieces, or if you will, fragments of a first original account that I designate with the letter A.<sup>18</sup>

Astruc goes on to claim that Genesis was comprised of four sources, all redacted together at a later stage. Prior to Astruc, scholars had offered observations on individual quirks within the text. Astruc was the first to offer a systematic accounting for these fissures and inconsistencies. Laws had been deduced to explain the

---

<sup>15</sup> J.W. Rogerson, "Early Old Testament Critics in the Roman Catholic Church – Focusing on the Pentateuch," in M. Saebo (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–2008), 2:837–50, here 846; and R. Smend, "Jean Astruc: A Physician as a Bible Scholar," in J. Jarick (ed.), *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 157–73, here 166.

<sup>16</sup> See P. Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121–60.

<sup>17</sup> On Astruc and his work, see Rogerson "Early Old Testament Critics," 846–48; Smend, "Jean Astruc," 157–73; A. Nahkola, "The Memoires of Moses and the Genesis of Method in Biblical Criticism: Astruc's Contribution," in J. Jarick (ed.), *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 204–19.

<sup>18</sup> J. Astruc, *Conjectures sur les Mémoires Originaux: Dont Il Paroit que Moyse s'est Servi pour Composer le Livre de la Génèse: avec des Remarques, qui Appuient ou qui Éclaircissent ces Conjectures* (Brussels: Fricx, 1753), 17–18, translated in Smend, "Jean Astruc," 166.

phenomena of nature and now Astruc had provided laws of composition to explain the phenomena of fissures within the biblical text. We see here, if in limited scope, the first systematic attempt to determine the compositional pre-cursors of the biblical text.<sup>19</sup> Rudolph Smend aptly characterizes Astruc's adoption of the scientific orientation of his age: "Astruc is a surgeon who also treats the Bible with his medical instruments."<sup>20</sup>

I would stress, however, that Astruc's lasting contribution to the field was not his documentary hypothesis itself. The details of Astruc's decomposition of the text of Genesis have not withstood the test of time, and no scholar today holds to even a small part of his accounting. Astruc's real legacy is in the spirit that pervades *Conjectures*—that spirit of confidence that adducing a set of laws can solve the mysteries of human texts, just as they do the mysteries of nature. Astruc, like Spinoza and Simon before him, had only the biblical text as his data from which to work. The earlier two seventeenth-century scholars expressed doubt that analysis of the text alone could yield its compositional history. Astruc, living and working in the confident age of the Enlightenment, believed that it could. All the text needed was a deductive set of laws to explain its inconsistencies.

If Astruc stands at a remove from his seventeenth century predecessors, he stands at an equal remove from the biblicists that would follow him in the nineteenth. Although Astruc identifies four sources for the book of Genesis, he makes no attempt to characterize their ideology, socially or religiously; no attempt to order these sources chronologically; no attempt to explain how the various sources may have interacted historically. In fact, Astruc maintained that Moses himself was the redactor of these documents. In short, Astruc's work is a *literary* exercise, but one uninterested in the history of the text, and certainly not in the individuals and communities that might have produced them. These were concerns that would arise only with the advent of historicist consciousness at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, it is only in the late eighteenth century, in the wake of the scientific revolution that the idea takes hold that the truth behind the past could be discovered through a scientific method.<sup>21</sup> It is no coincidence that it was only toward the end of the century that Johann Gottfried Eichhorn in his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1780–83) would be the first to take the putative documents and begin debate about the relative age of each.

---

<sup>19</sup> Nahkola, "The Memoires of Moses," 204, 214.

<sup>20</sup> Smend, "Jean Astruc," 158.

<sup>21</sup> I. Provan, "Knowing and Believing: Faith in the Past," in C. Bartholomew et al. (eds.), *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 229–66, here 231–32.

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY GERMAN HISTORICIST TRADITION

The field of critical biblical studies largely takes shape in nineteenth century Germany. To be sure there are many important developments that transpire thereafter as well, but the main terms of reference that continue to dominate compositional theory of the Hebrew Bible today—author, source, fragment, redactor, supplement and editorial layer—are developed in this age. To appreciate the ways in which the field developed at this time, it is crucial to examine it against the backdrop of nineteenth century German historicism.

In earlier centuries, events of the past were retold for the purpose of illustrating morals and teachings, but the past had not been the subject of critical study in its own right. The end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century witness a profound awareness of the need to critically assess the received traditions about past events. Frederick Beiser, a leading scholar of nineteenth century German historicism sums up the agenda of the historicist movement:

The agenda of historicism was simple but ambitious: to legitimate history as a science. Its aim was to show what makes history a science. All the thinkers in the historicist tradition . . . wanted to justify the scientific status of history. They used “science” in a broad sense of that term corresponding to the German word “Wissenschaft,” that is, some methodical means of acquiring knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

If history could become a science in its own right, then it would enjoy all the status and prestige of the natural sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics.<sup>23</sup> Historicism would prove phenomenally successful in its ambition: between the 1850’s and 1880’s the movement would mark its golden years, when its prestige was deemed no less than that of the natural sciences. If the eighteenth century had been the age of reason, the nineteenth had become that of history.<sup>24</sup> If in the former period, educated people turned to philosophy to unlock the mysteries of human life, during the late 1880’s it was the scientific analysis of the past that would provide insight and inspiration in politics, law, economics, morals and religion.<sup>25</sup> In this section I selectively survey three elements of this movement which shape the historical-critical study of the Bible to this day. As we shall see, these elements are axioms and attitudes

---

<sup>22</sup> Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> J.H. Zammito, “Historicism,” in M.N. Forster and K. Gjesdal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 779–805, here 792; Provan, “Knowing and Believing,” 234.

that are challenged by the recent recourse to empirical models for textual development.

### I. INDIVIDUATION

Perhaps the most influential historicist writing of the early nineteenth century was an 1821 essay by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of the Berlin University, "On the Historian's Task."<sup>26</sup> In the essay, Humboldt places great stock in identifying the *principium individuationis*, the defining characteristic of a great person, an event, or a culture:

Every human individuality is an idea rooted in actuality, and this idea shines forth so brilliantly from some individuals that it seems to have assumed the form of an individual merely to use it as a vehicle for expressing itself . . . The spiritual principle of individuality therefore remains active in the midst of the history of nations guided by needs, passions, and apparent accidents, and it is more powerful than those elements.<sup>27</sup>

The idea behind a person, nation or epic was nothing less than its individuating principle, what makes it this unique or distinctive person, nation or epoch.<sup>28</sup> The expression in this passage assigns such individualization almost metaphysical status. This emphasis on the discreet, individuated, nation, event and person, is a hallmark of nineteenth century German historicism.<sup>29</sup> In the analysis of historical phenomena, that which individuates is given place of pride over identifying that which is universal and common. This is a view of history infused with nineteenth century Romanticism, and its celebration of the greatness of the individual soul. A literary work is appreciated as a window into the soul of its creator, and hence the significance of the author comes to the forefront at this time.<sup>30</sup>

### II. NARRATIVES OF CAUSATION

For these historians, it was insufficient to simply lay bare "the facts." The task of the historian was to connect these events through a historical narrative of cause and effect.<sup>31</sup> This aim paralleled the aims of scientists engaged in the natural sciences. Observed facts are transformed into a conjecture. Individual data

---

<sup>26</sup> W. von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," *History and Theory* 6.1 (1967), 57–71. Appeared originally as "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers," in *Abhandlungen der Historisch-Philologischen Klasse der Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften aus den Jahren 1820–21* (Berlin, 1822).

<sup>27</sup> Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," 69.

<sup>28</sup> Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> M. Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2006), 15.

<sup>31</sup> G.G. Iggers, "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56.1 (1995), 129–52, here 131.

must upon closer inspection reveal an interdependence.<sup>32</sup> Nineteenth century German scholarship in all fields of inquiry sought out explanations that were all-encompassing. This was the age that spawned Freud's theories of the human psyche and Einstein's theories of relativity. Humboldt's essay cited earlier also stresses the importance for the historian to establish the interdependence of events and their causation:

The historian cannot be satisfied merely with the loose external relationships of the individual events . . . he has to proceed to the center of things from which their true nexus can be understood . . . An understanding of them is the combined product of their constitution and the sensibility supplied by the beholder . . . The historian must render strict account of their inner nexus, must establish for himself a picture of the active forces, must recognize their trends at a given moment, must inquire into the relationship of both forces and trends to the existing state of affairs and to the changes that have preceded it.<sup>33</sup>

The task of creating this narrative of coherence rested with the historian and his senses of empathetic intuition and interpretation. Inherent in this hermeneutic was the confidence that the observing historian could indeed recapture the causative relationship between events and the motivations of the actors responsible for them.<sup>34</sup>

### III. PRIMARY SOURCES

One of the hallmarks of nineteenth century historicism was introduced by Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Leopold von Ranke who asserted that history would earn its status as a science by basing its findings on original, authentic *sources*.<sup>35</sup> This, they believed, would provide the facts of what had really happened, the raw data. Tradition had passed down tales about the past, but only by returning to primary sources contemporaneous with the events under study could the historian attain a clear view of events past. Primary sources were viewed as bearing greater objectivity than secondary sources to the same account.<sup>36</sup> Niebuhr had pioneered this approach to the study of Roman history and Ranke developed it as a methodology sending his students to archives in search of documents contemporary with the age under study.

---

<sup>32</sup> See Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 20, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," 64.

<sup>34</sup> Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 168, 213; Provan, "Knowing and Believing," 233.

<sup>35</sup> Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

**PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL STUDY  
OF THE BIBLE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY  
GERMANY**

The premises outlined above permeated the critical study of the Bible in nineteenth century Germany and remain central to the practice of historical critical method in many circles of the discipline today. To illustrate the centrality of these premises in nineteenth century scholarship, I take as an example the most celebrated study of the nineteenth century, Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*. Note in the first place, the genre of this classic work. It is not a commentary on a book or set of books from the Bible. What are primarily composed at this time are histories—histories of Israel and of its religion.<sup>37</sup> In theory the goal of the critical study of the Bible could have been to understand the text as the primary end, using all historical data available to elucidate it. However, in the nineteenth century the priorities are inverted: the Bible is studied in primary fashion to produce a religious history of the people and the culture that created it.

To arrive at a proper history of Israel, however, requires, as in all historical inquiry during this period, a return to the original sources. Of course, manuscripts of the biblical texts contemporaneous with the events they describe, or even from the biblical period were, and still are, unavailable. But imbued with the confidence of the scientific revolution, biblicists of the time believed that access to original sources was available through the careful literary mining of the *textus receptus*. By identifying irregularities of all sorts within the text, its earlier precursors could be reproduced. Nineteenth century biblicists were not of one opinion concerning source criticism, and already then some preferred a theory of assembled fragments, or supplements to a base text.<sup>38</sup> But in the end, the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis carried the day because its four sources offered a glimpse into the stages of Israelite religious development that preceded the redacted Pentateuch. Today, source criticism is thought of as one approach, or as a sub-field within the broader field of biblical studies. In its original nineteenth century German setting, however, just the reverse was true. Source criticism of the Bible was but a subset, or a mere iteration of the general approach of source analysis (*Quellenkritik* or *Quellenforschung*), the standard scholarly tool for the investigation of all fields of human history and culture.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> J.L. Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (trans. P. Dominique; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 109.

<sup>38</sup> T.A. Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39–40.

<sup>39</sup> P. Machinist, "The Road Not Taken: Wellhausen and Assyriology," in G. Galil, M. Geller, and A. Millard (eds.), *Homeland and Exile; Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded* (Leiden: Brill, 2009),

As noted, nineteenth century German historians believed that the master texts of a culture revealed their authors' particular distinctiveness and special genius. For biblicists, this meant that the texts of the Hebrew scriptures needed to be viewed first and foremost in Israelite context, and only thereafter in a broader, ancient Near Eastern context. Biblicists therefore placed a premium on so-called internal evidence—seeming irregularities within the text—to parse the texts, before considering comparison with other, extra-biblical materials.<sup>40</sup> Israelite and post-exilic Jewish history had to move from within to without, that is, to begin by establishing the inner dynamic of development of Israelite culture as revealed by analysis of internal textual evidence, before expanding to see these texts in external cultural contexts which are only supplemental. To primarily locate a biblical text in its broader context would run the risk of flattening out the distinctiveness of Israelite culture in the search for universal phenomena.<sup>41</sup> The *Prolegomena* employs this hermeneutic as virtually no external texts are invoked, and its argument rests on the internal evidence of the Hebrew texts themselves.

Wellhausen's hypothesis also shows us how a work structured by a historical-ideological narrative could capture the imagination of his age. More fully than anyone before him, Wellhausen had managed to correlate the discreet sources he identified with distinct, successive periods of the Israelite religious development: JE harkened back to the period of the divided monarchy. D was composed in the period of Josianic reform in the seventh century and P represented a more cultic emphasis of the post-exilic period.<sup>42</sup> Wellhausen's hypothesis was greeted with immediate acclaim not because it was based on foolproof evidence. Indeed, many aspects of his work have been since discarded by scholars working in the historical critical paradigm. His work won immediate acclaim because it produced more fully than any earlier work a comprehensive *narrative*. His narrative offered the clearest picture yet of how the identification and chronology of the putative sources reflected the romanticist notion of development.<sup>43</sup> In Wellhausen's work, the historical critical paradigm achieved what Edgar Krentz defines as the ultimate purpose of historical-critical inquiry of biblical litera-

---

469–532, here 498.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

<sup>42</sup> J. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 266.

<sup>43</sup> D.J.A. Clines, *Response to Rolf Rendtorff's "What Happened to the Yahwist? Reflections after Thirty Years"*, SBL Forum, available at <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=551>. It is worth noting that Wellhausen had been promised no honorarium for his work. The book enjoyed such great sales, however, that the publisher shared its profits with him. See S. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183.

ture: “[historical criticism of the Bible] produces history in the modern sense, for it consciously and critically investigates biblical documents to write a narrative of the history they reveal.”<sup>44</sup>

Today, of course, not all biblicists see the Pentateuch as dissolvable into constituent “sources,” cobbled together by a redactor. Nonetheless nineteenth century German historicism bequeathed an agenda to diachronic biblical studies that is still at the core of the discipline today. Common to all contemporary theories of textual growth is the mandate to engage in four pursuits: 1) to identify fissures in the text as markers of diachronic development, on the basis of internal evidence; 2) if possible, to characterize the ideology that animates each of these component parts; 3) to adduce a theory of composition—sources, fragments, supplements, layers, etc.—that accounts for the shape of the final text; 4) to date the component parts and propose a chronology of textual growth.

### EMPIRICAL MODELS AND THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF TEXTUAL GROWTH

I turn now to canvas the claims of scholars who have invoked empirical models to reconstruct textual growth in ancient Israel. My aim is to explore the implications of these claims in light of the premises that have guided for so long much of the work on the textual growth of the Hebrew Bible.

The recent studies on empirical models of textual growth sound a consistent chord: the epigraphic evidence from the neighboring cultures of the ancient Near East suggests that many of the forms of editing routinely hypothesized concerning textual growth in ancient Israel are not attested in these comparative corpora. Contemporary theorists often assume that textual emendation in the ancient Near East can only be a process of supplementation but not of deletion.<sup>45</sup> Empirical models, however, demonstrate that revisions expanded but also suppressed earlier material.<sup>46</sup> Contemporary theorists often will assume that the entirety of an earlier source can be recovered through diachronic analysis.<sup>47</sup> Empirical models, however, reveal that scribes rarely appropriate earlier compositions in their entirety.<sup>48</sup> Contemporary theorists, especially in Pentateuchal studies, hypothesize the conflation of parallel sources.

---

<sup>44</sup> Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ska, *Introduction*, 169–70; C. Levin, *The Old Testament: A Brief Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 27; U. Becker, *Exegese des Alten Testaments* (UTB, 2664; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 84; See discussion of these positions in Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted*, 16–25.

<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the Gilgamesh Epic, see Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 127; for discussion of a range of Israelite and Judean texts in full length treatment, see Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted*.

<sup>47</sup> See sources above, n. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 99–100.

Empirical models, however, suggest that scribes did not preserve source documents unaltered and without gaps, and this is especially true in cases of conflation of parallel sources.<sup>49</sup> Some theorists envision multiple stages of revision and emendation.<sup>50</sup> Empirical models reveal that even the most complex documented cases rarely feature more than two or three stages of major revision of a given text.<sup>51</sup> David Carr summarizes his findings:

The documented variety of readable sources that can be produced out of Pentateuchal and other texts militates against the probability that such reconstructed sources ever existed in an earlier time. Instead, given what we know about partial preservation and modification of prior traditions by ancient scribes, it is more likely that most (semi-)readable texts produced by contemporary transmission historians are nothing but the inventions of their creators.<sup>52</sup>

These findings undermine several of the premises that have long guided much work on the textual growth of Hebrew scriptures and beg a reassessment of their validity:

***I. INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE: WHICH IS PRIMARY?***

German biblicists of the nineteenth century placed a premium on internal sources over against the elucidation to be garnered from external sources. No doubt, this stemmed in part from the paucity of comparative materials available during that period. Nineteenth century analysis of the Bible, its religion and institutions predate the recovery of much of the data that we have today from the ancient Near East.<sup>53</sup> Instruction in Assyriology was hardly available at German institutions of this era. While French and British excavators began uncovering the riches of Mesopotamia in the 1840's and 1850's, it was only in 1872 that George Smith offered his astonishing lecture that revealed an Akkadian precursor to the biblical flood story.<sup>54</sup> Significant efforts to analyze these epigraphic materials did not commence until the 1880's and 1890's—more than a decade after the publication of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*.<sup>55</sup>

This is not to say that these scholars ignored cognate cultures altogether. Wellhausen, notably, utilized Arabic as a philological

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>50</sup> See broadly, the essays contained in T.B. Dozeman, K. Schmid, and B.J. Schwartz (eds.), *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (FAT, 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), and in Gertz et al., *Formation of the Pentateuch*.

<sup>51</sup> Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>53</sup> Machinist, "The Road Not Taken," 469.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 505.

tool to better understand biblical Hebrew. Nonetheless, it could have been expected that with the discovery of other ancient texts the study of the compositional history of the biblical texts would have undergone a paradigm change. It would have been hoped that scholars would have sought empirical evidence for how texts evolved and grew, based upon the epigraphic finds of the neighboring cultures. Indeed, some scholars took Wellhausen to task for failing to do just this. The eminent classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, wrote of Wellhausen, in his 1928 autobiography: “He remained just a theologian; this explains the entire orientation of his [Prolegomena]. He resisted, as he should not have done, working his way into Assyrian and Babylonian.”<sup>56</sup> No less a figure than Hermann Gunkel wrote of the practice of source criticism in 1931,

[Wellhausen’s] overall vision was sketched without reference to the history of the other areas of the Orient of the time and cannot in all parts be made to concur with the ancient oriental discoveries which have multiplied in such an unforeseen manner. The school . . . has buried itself in . . . increasingly fruitless literary criticism and has shown no serious comprehension of the literary history that has become more prominent in the last few years.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the field generally failed to engage this line of inquiry until quite recently suggests that habits and ways of thought predisposed it from doing so. The romanticist proclivity of nineteenth century German scholarship led scholars of that age to believe that the genius of individual cultures had to be first determined from within the inner dynamics of these master texts called the “sources.” Today, most scholars would aver that Israel, like every culture of the ancient Near East, indeed displayed cultural and perhaps even literary practices that were *sui generis*. Yet, in large part—maybe even in major part—Israel’s literary output is best seen as part of a scribal milieu of the ancient Near East. The insistence in some quarters of the field today that internal evidence trumps external evidence is a holdover from a bygone era. It is a claim that today requires legitimation. It cannot be assumed.

Moreover, empirical models threaten the very notion of so-called “internal evidence.” Internal evidence is deduced by noting irregularities within the text and decomposing the text into constituent parts. Meanwhile, scholars pointing to empirical models are concluding that the task of accurately separating the received texts

---

<sup>56</sup> U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Erinnerungen 1848–1914* (Leipzig: K.F. Koehler, 1928), 189–90, translated and cited in Machinist, “The Road Not Taken,” 483 n. 33.

<sup>57</sup> H. Gunkel, “Wellhausen,” in H. Gunkel and L. Zscharnack (eds.), *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen, 1931), 1821, translated in Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 262.

into constituent parts is considerably more difficult than we may have thought. Time and again, we compare the earlier stage of an ancient text's development with a later stage, and see that there is no way that the later text could have yielded to analysis to produce the older, earlier text. Empirical models demonstrate that writers often borrowed a range of elements in their compositions, from individual words, to syntactic patterns to whole formulas. Later works are a bricolage of earlier works.<sup>58</sup> The romantic idea of the author as one who composes *ex nihilo* does not fit the empirical data of ancient Near Eastern epigraphic finds. There is no author in biblical Israel without the great train of mimetic transmissions that come before. This undermines the very attempt to ground theories of textual development on the basis of internal evidence alone.

For nineteenth century scholars and for many today as well the purpose of deconstructing the text was to recover windows into Israel's origins: to describe the major themes of those sources, their language and above all, their historical settings, and then to reconstruct the process by which they were compiled to create the received text. As Roland Barthes has written, the modernist notion of the author and literary criticism understood as historical criticism are notions that go hand in hand.<sup>59</sup> However, if empirical models are given pride of place in uncovering the literary practices of ancient Israel, then we must accept that we may not have clear access to these putative sources. Put differently, this means that we may not have trustworthy "windows" onto the world of earliest Israel, which is to say we may not be able to chart history itself in reliable fashion through recourse to so-called internal evidence.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF EXPERIMENTAL METHOD IN NINETEENTH CENTURY GERMAN HISTORICIST THOUGHT

To consider the place of empirical models in the reconstruction of the growth of the biblical text we need to consider the role of intuition versus the role of evidence and methodological control in scientific inquiry, and particularly how this issue evolved in nineteenth century Germany.

At the dawn of the historicist era in the early nineteenth century, the natural sciences were viewed as an ally of the critical study of history. Humboldt was adamant in his affirmation of the close connection between natural science and the new science of history.<sup>60</sup> The physical world provided the analogies upon which the

---

<sup>58</sup> The phenomenon is illustrated in full length fashion in V.A. Hurowitz, *Inu Anum Sirum: Literary Structures in the Non-judicial Sections of Codex Hammurabi* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1994).

<sup>59</sup> R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, Ubu Web Papers, available at [www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> See P.H. Reill, "Science and the Construction of the Cultural

world of human activity could be comprehended and explained. For Humboldt, “it is always a safeguarding device to trace the analogies in the physical world when investigating that of the spiritual.”<sup>61</sup> Living nature presents the historian, the linguist and the anthropologist the analogies necessary for the establishment of these disciplines as sciences.<sup>62</sup> Inspired by the natural sciences, the scientific pursuit of history would be executed with a premium placed on induction, objectivity and impartiality.

However, as the natural sciences progressed by leaps and bounds, the alliance of *Geisteswissenschaft* with *Naturwissenschaft* became a liability. The natural sciences were developing precise tools of measurement and experimentation. Statistical analysis of results ensured the solid base of the results. Practitioners of the human sciences had no hope of keeping up with the refined results achieved by natural “scientists”—a term that first appears in English in 1831. By comparison, the results of the human sciences seemed “soft” and unscientific. Champions of the human sciences were caught, proverbially speaking, between a rock and a hard place. Since Newton, science had been considered the benchmark of rigorous method for critical inquiry. Yet it was this same “science”—the science of the natural world, which was demonstrating just how unscientific the *Geisteswissenschaften* really were. The solution was to cut loose and declare autonomy.<sup>63</sup> The human sciences, and with them history, were true sciences, their proponents claimed. But they operated under a different methodology. Only by recognizing the autonomy and legitimacy of the human sciences, could advances be made. Chief in this effort was the man considered by many to be one of the fathers of the social sciences Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). For Dilthey, the positivist epistemology of the natural sciences, with its emphasis on statistics and experimentation, was claiming an undue hegemony over the human sciences.<sup>64</sup> The two realms, he claimed, pursued fundamentally different goals. The goal of natural science was *Erklären* (explaining), while the goal of the human sciences was *Verstehen* (understanding). For several decades, theorists would debate and clarify the differences between the two methods and the best ways to achieve each.<sup>65</sup> Critically, historians considered the methodology of their

---

Sciences in Late Enlightenment Germany: The Case of Wilhelm von Humboldt,” *History and Theory* 33.3 (1994), 345–66.

<sup>61</sup> Humboldt, “On the Historian’s Task,” 69.

<sup>62</sup> Reill, “Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences,” 356.

<sup>63</sup> See I. Veit-Brause, “Science and the Cultural Politics of Academic Disciplines in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany: Emil Du Bois-Reymond and the Controversy Over the Role of the Cultural Sciences,” *History of the Human Sciences* 14.4 (2001), 31–56; Reill, “Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences,” 346.

<sup>64</sup> Zammito, “Historicism,” 801.

<sup>65</sup> See the essays contained in U. Feest (eds.), *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen* (Berlin: Springer, 2010).

discipline *sui generis* and independent. This method of inquiry championed an epistemology that placed a high premium on the intuition and imagination of the investigating historian.<sup>66</sup>

German historians debated the issue: can the goals of the historian—to depict a coherent narrative of cause and effect of the past—be attained? What methodological control was necessary to ensure the accuracy of the conclusions? One of the pre-eminent thinkers of the age, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) wrote that the critical school of Niebuhr and Ranke was fraught with naïve optimism in its uncritical confidence in what historical criticism can accomplish. Critical method is at its best with regard to the relatively recent past, where many original sources are available. The method is on far shakier ground with regard to ancient history, where there are often too few sources to work with.<sup>67</sup> Droysen writes that the naïve confidence of the critical school stems from the illusion that the process of sifting and sorting available evidence would allow the historian to distinguish the truth and discover, in von Ranke’s words “how things actually were.” Droysen’s voice found little resonance within the field of biblical studies, and here, too, scholars were convinced that by carefully assessing the seeming irregularities in the text, the prized sources would become accessible. The results would be ensured by the investigator’s intuition. Intuition within this hermeneutic works on two levels. The biblicalist’s intuition allows him or her to correctly identify fissures within the text and identify them as markers of diachronic development. Second, intuition allows the biblicalist to posit a theory of composition—sources, fragments, supplements, etc.<sup>68</sup> The purpose of this sifting was to identify constituent sources that displayed the cherished trait of *consistency*. The core of *Gymnasium* training at this time in Germany were the subjects of Greek and Roman grammar and mathematics, admired because they offered training in abstract consistent forms of knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

The irony of this hermeneutic is that it counters the very historicist ethos it seeks to embody. For all historicists of this period, literature is a product of a specific culture situated in a specific and individuated time and place. Conventions of coherence, of communication, and of literary production are all profoundly human

---

<sup>66</sup> Veit-Brause, “Science and the Cultural Politics of Academic Disciplines,” 37; Reill, “Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences,” 361.

<sup>67</sup> J.G. Droysen, *Historik: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (eds. P. Leyh and H.W. Blanke; Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 113; and discussion in Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 309.

<sup>68</sup> Provan, “Knowing and Believing,” 233, 239.

<sup>69</sup> D. Phillips, “Epistemological Distinctions and Cultural Politics: Educational Reform and the Naturwissenschaft/Geisteswissenschaft Distinction in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in U. Feest (eds.), *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen* (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 15–35, here 19; cf. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 79.

constructs, and are themselves historically bound. We might have expected theorists—then and now—to sound a note of caution in adducing theories of textual composition. We might have expected investigators to take cognizance of their own situatedness, and to be wary that their own canons of coherence and of literary production could easily be anachronistically superimposed upon the cultures of yore. And yet we see virtually no awareness of these pitfalls in the scholarship of compositional theory of Hebrew scriptures up until quite recently. This, I would suggest, is evidence of the German historicist legacy of the nineteenth century. In declaring the autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and within those, the historical critical study of the Hebrew Bible, intuition and imagination assumed pride of place in the governing epistemology. External control to check intuitive theories was an element that was largely sacrificed—at least for biblical studies—in the great divorce between *Geisteswissenschaft* and the *Naturwissenschaft*. The *Erklären/Verstehen* debates, pitting knowledge about human being and texts against knowledge about the natural world, represented an epistemological distinction peculiar to German-speaking Europe.<sup>70</sup> In his study of nineteenth century biblical hermeneutics John Rogerson notes that there was much greater creativity in Germany than in England. He attributes this to a difference of philosophical disposition. English philosophy is grounded in an empiricist tradition of evidence and experimentation. He concludes, “if I may generalize from my own attitudes, English scholarship would prefer to say that it does not know, rather than build elaborate theories upon slender premises.”<sup>71</sup>

Here, then, we cut to the chase of the debate over the place of empirical models for biblical composition: For the better part of two centuries, scholars have not sought out external methodological control for their work, instead relying upon intuition and the canons of coherence of their times to fit the data of the biblical text into a procrustean bed of compositional theory. Those that invoke empirical models are doing much more than introducing new evidence to the field. Methodologically speaking they are insisting on a mode of research which the field has resisted for two centuries.

I would like to dramatize just how absent this way of thinking has been from the field with reference to an experiment that could have been carried out even by the earliest critics who originated the field of compositional theory of the biblical text. An empirical experiment to test our capacity to develop accurate theories of textual decomposition could have been conducted using the Book of Chronicles and the corresponding passages in the *Vorlage* of SamuelKings. Imagine the following: a scholar takes the First Book of Chronicles and carefully notes all of the changes witnessed rela-

<sup>70</sup> Phillips, “Epistemological Distinctions and Cultural Politics,” 15.

<sup>71</sup> Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 292.

tive to the corresponding passages in Samuel–Kings. On the basis of the evidence, the scholar then adduces a literary algorithm that explains what the author of Chronicles does to the *Vorlage* of Samuel–Kings to produce what we see in the later text. This literary algorithm will tell us how the later text systematically adopts or adapts, supplements or deletes material relative to the source texts—all on the basis of the collected evidence. The scholar now moves to the Second Book of Chronicles, and tries to work back from that text, on the basis of the algorithm adduced from the work on First Chronicles and its *Vorlage*. To what degree would the scholar be able to accurately recreate the *Vorlage* of Second Chronicles?

Such an experiment would give an indication of our capacity (or lack thereof) to recreate earlier texts on the basis of existing ones, in their final form. In fact, such an experiment would show us what the very best results are that we could hope for. This is because the work to recreate the *Vorlage* of Second Chronicles would have been based on a wealth of evidence observed in the first half of the book and its sources. There is little theory or hypothesizing here. The beauty of this experiment is that it is totally empirical. It is remarkable that none of the early critics working in compositional theory of the Hebrew Bible thought to execute such an experiment. It is even more remarkable that to this very day, this experiment has not been attempted. This oversight speaks volumes to the hallowed place of deduction and intuition in the discipline as opposed to the place of experimentation, control and empirical models. In an oft-cited article, Steven A. Kaufman says that he began to try to do such an experiment with the Temple Scroll and its *Vorlage*, the Pentateuch, until he saw that it was “a consummately fruitless endeavor.”<sup>72</sup>

### III. UNWARRANTED CONFIDENCE

Finally, the invocation of empirical models undermines the presumed confidence with which scholars have produced theories of textual development since Astruc. Here, too, the threat of empirical models is not to biblical studies per se, but to a particular intellectual attitude that undergirds much of the discipline. David Carr’s call for “methodological modesty”<sup>73</sup> flies in the face of what has guided the discipline for so long, foundationalist thinking. Foundationalists are motivated by a desire for certainty in their work, believing that by erecting an elaborate system of analysis, such a secure foundation will be found. This motivation is what the philosopher Richard L. Bernstein refers to as Cartesian anxiety.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> S. Kaufman, “The Temple Scroll and Higher Criticism,” *HUCA* 53 (1982), 29–43, here 29.

<sup>73</sup> Carr, *Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> See R.L. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

Descartes had insisted that we accept only knowledge that can be known with certainty. Researchers in all fields of study could do no less than to claim to have achieved this certainty, and scholars of the Bible were no exception. Witness the supreme confidence expressed in the writing of the nineteenth century biblicalist Charles Augustus Briggs, co-author of the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon:

The valleys of biblical truth have been filled up with the debris of human dogmas, ecclesiastical institutions, liturgical formulas, priestly ceremonies, and casuistic practices. Historical criticism is searching for the rock-bed of divine truth and the massive foundations of the Divine Word, in order to recover the real Bible. Historical criticism is sifting all this rubbish. It will gather our every precious stone. Nothing will escape its keen eye . . . As surely as the temple of Herod and the city of the [H]asmoneans arose from the ruins of the of the former temples and cities, just so surely will the old Bible rise in the reconstructions of biblical criticism into a splendour and a glory greater than ever before.<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, we saw that the fathers of the historical-critical paradigm, Spinoza and Richard Simon, were actually sanguine about our capacity to answer the historical-critical questions we ask of the biblical text. Scholars who are currently doing compositional work on the basis of empirical models are really reconnecting to the paradigm's earliest tradition of measured skepticism. Compositional theories that draw from nineteenth century premises perpetuate the belief that as historians of the ancient world, we have the types and quantity of social and economic data as do scholars working in later historical periods where the documentation is more extensive. By drawing our attention to empirical models, these scholars provide a much needed check and control for our work. But this control, perforce, must rob the discipline of the self-confidence that has been its hallmark since Astruc. Juha Pakkala has recently argued precisely this point. He notes the difficulty diachronic scholars will have with the empirical evidence that later versions of a text frequently demonstrate suppression of earlier material: "The assumption that parts of the [earlier] text were omitted would leave the scholar with less tangible evidence about the past and with questions that the texts could not answer. The theories would become much less certain."<sup>76</sup> Although Spinoza and Simon represented only the dawn of the historical criticism of the Bible, their measured skepticism should not be discarded out of hand. We would do well to consider Rudolph Smend's characterization of the field of biblical studies as a "discipline in which the material essen-

---

<sup>75</sup> C.A. Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* (New York: Scribner, 1899), 531–32.

<sup>76</sup> Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted*, 14.

tially does not change and which has been contemplated for centuries by people who were not more ignorant than we are.”<sup>77</sup>

Finally, moving into the twentieth century, I identify an additional cultural factor that has impeded the natural turn toward empirical models in the diachronic study of Scripture: the monumental influence of the thought of Karl Barth (1886–1968) on the discipline of biblical studies. Barth recognized validity of historical criticism of the Bible, but granted it a decidedly secondary place in his approach to scripture: “The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification.”<sup>78</sup> Barth rejected the premise that the aim of biblical exegesis is to understand the historical development of Israel.<sup>79</sup> In his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, Barth elucidated the point further: “A religio-historical understanding of the Old Testament in abstraction from the revelation of the risen Christ is simply an abandonment of the New Testament and of the sphere of the Church in favor of that of the Synagogue, and therefore in favor of an Old Testament . . . understood apart from its true object and content.”<sup>80</sup> James Barr notes well the consequences that Barth’s view of scripture would have for biblical exegesis: “The principle thus set up has very important effects in Barth’s theology. It controls the methods by which exegesis will be permitted to work . . . [I]t affects the use of historical criticism; and indeed it finally decides all questions of ways in which the text may be able to sustain itself against what is alleged to be its interpretation. In a theology so dependent on close biblical work as Barth’s it is therefore extremely fateful that such a principle should be set up.”<sup>81</sup> The appeal to empirical models for textual growth based on the cognate texts of the ancient Near East

---

<sup>77</sup> R. Smend, *Deutsche Alttestamentler in drei Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 9, translated in J.C. Gertz, “Jean Astruc and Source Criticism in the Book of Genesis,” in J. Jarick (ed.), *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Louth and Jean Astruc* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 190–203, here 190.

<sup>78</sup> K. Barth, “The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches,” in idem, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, (trans. D. Horton, 1928; repr., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 240–41.

<sup>79</sup> On Barth’s view of historical criticism and biblical exegesis see P.E. Capetz, “The Old Testament as a Witness to Jesus Christ: Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis of the Bible according to Karl Barth,” *JR* 90.4 (2010), 475–506.

<sup>80</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (trans. G.T. Thomson and H. Knight; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 489.

<sup>81</sup> J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (London: SCM, 1966), 90–91. See discussion in Capetz, “The Old Testament as a Witness,” 491.

is not a natural one within for Barth's hermeneutic. The notion that the biblical text might be composed according to the same canons of composition as those of idolatrous and pagan cultures undermines the unique character of the biblical text and its distinct theological mission.

John Barton notes that Barth's concern for the uniqueness of biblical ideas and writings and the focus of Jesus as their climax has characterized most of the work in biblical theology since the early twentieth century.<sup>82</sup> Barth's stress on the special character of the Bible and a comparative lack of interest in what lies behind the text have left an indelible mark on the theologies of Gerhard von Rad, Walther Eichrodt and Brevard Childs.<sup>83</sup> Barton notes further, that within the Anglo-American theological setting, divine revelation is understood textually; because revelation is contained in the words of the Bible, exegetical methods that prioritize looking behind the texts for the external realities that produced them are seen as unfaithful to Scripture.<sup>84</sup> To be sure, there are many fine scholars who study the growth of the biblical text without recourse to these empirical models, who are not motivated in the least by theological agendas. However, much of academic biblical studies in the past century has stemmed from the pens of scholars who train and who teach in theological seminaries where these priorities and proclivities toward the biblical text are deeply rooted. This theological climate, therefore, is a contributing factor to an exegesis of Scripture that de-emphasizes the importance of empirical models for understanding the growth of the Hebrew Scriptures.

---

<sup>82</sup> J. Barton, "(Pan-)Biblical Theology in the German—and English—speaking Worlds: A Comparison," in H. Assel, S. Beyerle, and C. Böttrich (eds.), *Beyond Biblical Theologies* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2012), 258.

<sup>83</sup> See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (trans. by D.M.G. Stalker; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968); W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. by J.A. Baker; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); See discussion in Barton, "(Pan-)Biblical Theology," 252.

<sup>84</sup> Barton, "(Pan-)Biblical Theology," 255.