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## What We Miss By Taking the Bible Apart

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# WHAT WE MISS BY TAKING THE BIBLE APART

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**T**he impulse to engage with the Bible is, at its roots, a religious—that is to say, a theological—one. So it has been for thousands of years, for both Jews and Christians.

This approach changed in the 18th century, with what we call the Enlightenment. I do not mean to discredit the Enlightenment. It shaped the world we live in, and we must be part of this world. Yet we also need to look with a somewhat critical eye at developments that originated from the emancipation of the human mind. The scientific reading of the Bible is one of those developments. I refer, of course, to the so-called historical-critical method.

I myself have been trained in this methodology, which dominated Old Testament scholarship from its emergence, in the 18th century, to the middle of this century.

But I must admit that this is mainly a *negative* method. It is “critical” in the sense that it denies certain aspects of biblical texts that up to then had seemed self-evident: The Pentateuch was *not* written by Moses; the Book of Isaiah is *not* the message of one prophet; the Psalms

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*\*Rolf Rendtorff, a well-known theologian, is Professor Emeritus of the University of Heidelberg and resides in Karben, Germany. Used with permission.*

were *not* composed by David, etc. The critical method tries to discern historical truths about the time and the authorship of biblical texts, and in many cases, the conclusions differ from what the texts themselves are saying, either explicitly or implicitly.

The historical-critical method has developed very sophisticated tools to examine the texts to determine whether they are homogeneous, to analyze their earlier and later elements, to divide them into sources, layers, redactional additions, and glosses. The starting point, however, is the suspicion that the text itself might have no integrity.

What intrigues me is why modern scholars study the Bible in this way with such intensity. Bible studies are still located in theological fac-

ulties or departments, divinity schools and theological seminaries. But the method used to study the Bible contrasts starkly with the religious intention of those institutions.

Early in his career, Julius Wellhausen—the German Bible scholar best known for the development of the so-called documentary hypothesis, which divides the Pentateuch into four major authorial strands\*\*—asked to be transferred from the University of Greifswald's theological faculty to the philosophical faculty. He explained: "I became a theologian because of my interest in the scientific study of the Bible. Gradually, I realized that a professor of theology has at the same time the practical task of preparing the students for their ministry in the Protestant church.

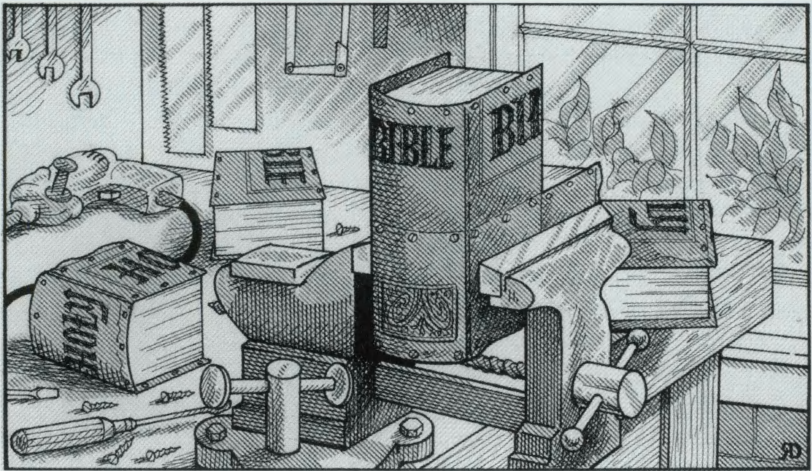


Illustration by Ray Driver

**Modern scholars often reflect what I call the hubris of the 19th century. They see everything more clearly than those who came before, in particular those who came before the Enlightenment. The so-called redactors, or final editors, of the biblical books, and similar scribes are, it is assumed, much less intelligent and informed than the modern professor.**

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But I do not succeed in this practical task; notwithstanding all my restraint. I render the students incapable of their ministry. Thus my theological professorship weighs heavily upon my conscience.”

Wellhausen obviously understood the discrepancy between his scientific approach to the Bible and the needs of the religious community. I regard myself as one of Wellhausen’s intellectual heirs; like him, I came to realize this discrepancy only gradually.

The Wellhausen letter from which I quoted was written in 1872 but was published only much later, by Alfred Jepsen, who also taught at Greifswald. In his publication of the letter, Jepsen asked, “How could Wellhausen come to the conviction that teaching an acknowledged truth would contradict the preaching of the gospel and therefore make people incapable for their ministry in the church?” In other words, if the

historical-critical method really reveals “the truth,” how can it contradict the ministry in a religious community?

I do not deny a certain plausibility to the results of modern scientific study of the Hebrew Bible. But I have two main objections to the way these results are often used. One is the conviction, not to say the complacency, with which the results of the historical-critical method are asserted. This has been true even as the results themselves have changed dramatically. [Rendtorff here cites a significant change in the dating of the “Yahwist strand of the Pentateuch” from the 10th or ninth century B.C. to the time of the Babylonian Exile (sixth century B.C.).] One would have expected an outcry about this shocking crumbling of one of the pillars of source-critical research. But that has not been the case; there has been no objection. Why not? Because the method itself

is regarded as valid, and therefore its results have to be accepted as true, even when they change fundamentally. What kind of "truth" is that?

My second objection is related to the first. Why should the documentary hypothesis, for example, be the only way to apply the historical-critical method to the Pentateuch? Why not use new approaches? [Rendtorff discusses what this would mean when applied to the Book of Isaiah.]

Modern scholars often reflect what I call the hubris of the 19th century. They see everything more clearly than those who came before, in particular those who came before the Enlightenment. The so-called redactors, or final editors, of the biblical books, and similar scribes are, it is assumed, much less intelligent and informed than the modern professor. The Hebrew of these ancient editors, it is sometimes said, is bad. They did not know the historical context of the texts they were reworking. Sometimes they did not even understand the "original" meaning of the text and therefore changed it for the worse, requiring the modern professor to put things in order and so make the text comprehensible.

Unfortunately, this is not simply a caricature; it is very close to reality. I do not mean to exclude myself from this tradition: As a young aca-

demic, I was sometimes very harsh with students who did not believe in the documentary hypothesis. But gradually, I began to understand the limits of such hypotheses. In addition to dissecting the text, we must try to read and understand the texts as they have come down to us. This is what Brevard Childs, in his important *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, calls "canonical interpretation."

As Childs emphasizes, the Bible was the sacred scripture of Israel. "Israel," in this context, refers to a community of faith. Therefore, to read the Hebrew Bible "as Scripture" means, first of all, to read it as a religious document that served a religious community.

From this viewpoint, the main question is no longer "How did this text emerge and develop?" but "What is the message of the text in its final form?" Only in this form did it serve as sacred scripture for a religious community.

Earlier I mentioned the hubris of 19th-century scholars. Here I would only plead for a new humility toward the text of the Bible. We have to interpret it, not change it. The Bible, in its final, canonical form, is always our teacher. □

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\*\* These strands are called J, or the Yahwist source (in German, Jahwist); E, or the Elohist source; P, or the Priestly Code; and D, or the Deuteronomic source.