

BIBLICAL CRITICISM

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For many centuries Jews regarded the Hebrew Bible as 'Holy Writ' and therefore studied it uncritically, as a sacrosanct document whose narratives are all historically true and whose commandments are all divine and therefore to be obeyed. This philosophy, known as Fundamentalism, is not exclusive to Judaism, but in our context it quintessentially expresses the view that the Five Books of Moses are the word of God revealed on Mt. Sinai. As a result, those who espouse this view say that everything in the Torah must be obeyed, and nothing may be denied or ignored.

Biblical Criticism (a technical term for modern, historical Bible study) is the phrase most commonly applied to study of the Bible which does not believe that this literalist approach is true to the facts, and which seeks, through a more scientific analysis, to arrive at a credible view of how and when the books of the Bible came into being.

Many people might be under the impression that a critical approach to the biblical text is a comparatively modern phenomenon, but they would be incorrect; we may trace such studies in the writings of Jewish and Christian scholars from as early as the 5th century CE, although it was in the 18th century that the process began

to accelerate. In the 19th century, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen propounded what came to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis, stating that the Pentateuch was composed from several strands (to each of which he gave a title), which spanned a period from the 9th to the 6th centuries BCE. He noted textual inconsistencies, repetitions, the use of different divine names, and other factors to substantiate his views.

Also in the 19th century, the growth of Middle Eastern archaeology led to fascinating discoveries (such as the Babylonian Creation epic and the Babylonian Flood story) that substantiated the view that the Bible was not a unique text but one that was a part of its cultural and historical milieu; but which also corroborated the historicity of many of its narratives, especially those dating from later centuries, like Kings, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Wellhausen's work inspired others to take a critical look at the rest of the books of the Bible, and their objective analyses of specific texts shed light on them and the context in which they had been written, as well as their likely date.

Inevitably, such an onslaught by

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'objective' scholars inspired a fundamentalist backlash, and some noted individuals set out to disprove the theories of Wellhausen and his later disciples. How convincingly they achieve their aims is a matter for personal preference. Over a 100 years after Wellhausen first propounded his theories, they no longer hold the sort of sway in biblical scholarship that they once did, although they undoubtedly opened the door for the scholarly understanding of the biblical text that is followed by the majority today and to which, to a greater or lesser extent, most open-minded Jews and Christians subscribe.

To a fundamentalist, all such theories are anathema, and an outrageous slur on divine authorship and authority. Take these away, they argue, and you remove any reason for observing the laws of the Torah, even for living a Jewish life.

Such attitudes are unacceptably and unnecessarily monolithic. To the Progressive Jew, Biblical Criticism has underpinned what for us is an obvious reality, that the Bible, and particularly the Torah, is a human document. We feel free to say that there is much in it that is inspiring, timeless, and beyond reproach; but biblical scholarship's analysis has also encouraged us to say that there is plenty that is flawed,

petty, and rooted in ancient politics and culture. We refuse to accept that the God in whom we believe propounded some of these latter concepts and laws, such as the stoning to death of a rebellious son or the permanent ostracism from the community of Israel of the members of ancient Canaanite tribes; we can only comprehend them as emanating from a human mind, and being rooted in the culture and morality of their time.

This does not mean to say that we necessarily discount the possibility of divine inspiration behind the Biblical text, far from it; the Bible is, after all, a remarkable document, replete with great wisdom and insights and expressing timeless thoughts and ideals that cannot easily be conceived as emanating from other than an extraordinary intellect. For many, the acknowledgement of the Deity behind this pre-eminent book is nothing less than a statement of the obvious, but it in no way diminishes the feeling that it is the work of human beings and should be responded to as such.

Scholars of Biblical Criticism, and the archaeologists and others whose work complements their own, have liberated modern Jews and Christians from the shackles of fundamentalist dogma, have enhanced the Bible's worth even

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while demonstrating that it is a richly composite work owing its inspiration to God, and have shown the historicity of many of its texts to an unparalleled degree.

Their theories may be disowned by traditionalists for whom scientific analysis and religious dogma are incompatible bedfellows, but they are hard to reject on any other grounds. We owe much to the courage of those whose search for the truth led them to take a stand against the received, uncritical wisdom of the ages, and from the fruits of whose research we are all the beneficiaries.

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One of a series of pamphlets by the
Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism