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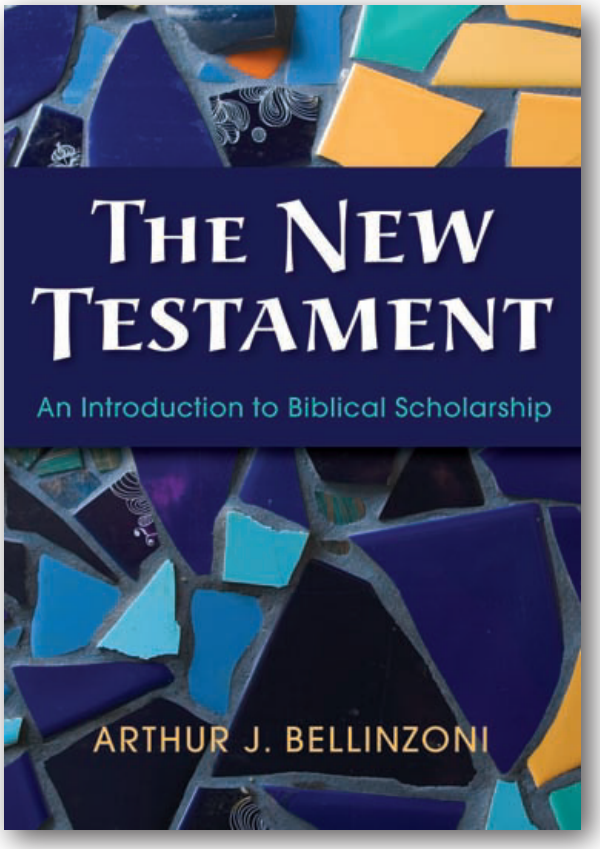
The New Testament

An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship

ARTHUR J. BELLINZONI



This is not your typical introduction to the New Testament. Rather, Bellinzoni invites the reader to understand how biblical scholars employ the historical method to understand better who Jesus of Nazareth really was and how and why oral and then written tradition about Jesus developed into the New Testament. Instead of simply summarizing the results of biblical scholarship, Bellinzoni discusses the rules of evidence and the tools of the historical method that scholars use. He then approaches the text of the New Testament by leading the reader step by step through relevant biblical texts in order to illustrate some of the tools of New Testament study and how these tools work: textual criticism, literary criticism and philology, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, etc. This volume doesn't just describe the conclusions of biblical scholarship, it invites the reader to actually do biblical scholarship and thereby draw the best possible conclusions about what happened, when, and why. This volume is not limited to the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, but discusses relevant extra-canonical early Christian literature, which is critical to an understanding of the history of the early church and the development of the New Testament canon.

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"This wide-ranging study is really two books in one: it outlines the methodological tools used in the critical study of the New Testament, and shows how their careful application can yield an historically sensitive reconstruction of Christian origins. For introductory students seeking to navigate the complex literary and social terrain of the New Testament and early Christian world, Bellinzoni's reasoned judgments and lucid insights will be a very welcome guide."

—David Reis, Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Oregon

ARTHUR J. BELLINZONI is Professor of Religion Emeritus at Wells College in Aurora, New York, and the author of *The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr, The Future of Christianity: Can It Survive?* and *The Old Testament: An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship*, the co-editor and part author of *Intellectual Honesty and Religious Commitment and The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*, and the editor of *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature Before Saint Irenaeus* (3 volumes).

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PREFACE

There are myriad introductions to both the Old and the New Testaments that are committed to the historical critical method of investigation, but introductory textbooks rarely address directly the foundational principles of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, I was introduced to the historical-critical study of the Bible without actually understanding the basis of and the justification for the historical approach. A friend called to my attention a few years ago the value of having an introductory textbook that addresses issues of methodology in order to enable students of the Bible to understand better the reasons for and the implications of the best results of biblical scholarship.

Accordingly, this book has a twofold purpose: (1) to introduce readers to the origins of and the reasons for the basic methodology of biblical scholarship; and (2) to provide an overview of the beginnings and early evolution of Christianity by employing those methods in an examination of relevant literature. An unusual feature of this book is that I do not simply describe methodology in a way that is pedantic and difficult for the reader to understand, but, where possible, I lead the reader through a series of exercises to illustrate how biblical scholarship actually "works."

In writing this book, I have been mindful of college undergraduates, seminary students, graduate students, and scholars in the field of New Testament studies. I am also mindful of laypersons who have some knowledge of the Bible but who may be unaware of the methodological basis of biblical scholarship and its results. It is essential that people at every level of understanding have an awareness of the kinds of conclusions that come with the rigorous application of the historical method of biblical scholarship.

This volume is not an introduction to the Bible, or even to the New Testament. There are already many excellent introductions to the Bible as a whole, and separate introductions to the Old and the New Testaments. Typically such introductions afford basic information about all of the books of the Bible. I am, however, not aware of any introductory study that tries to accomplish what I am attempting with this volume.

In the opening chapter, the introduction, I provide the reader with insight into the origins and the foundational principles of the historical method of biblical scholarship, including a discussion of the rules of evidence for the writing of history,

whether biblical history or any other history. The rules and methods for the writing of history are always the same whatever the subject matter. Nonetheless, the systematic application of the historical method to the Bible has come only with a struggle that has spanned several centuries and that is still not deeply implanted in the minds of millions of people.

The opening chapter of this volume is among the most important and the most challenging, although it is this material that is generally lacking in introductions to the New Testament. An understanding of the origin, the emergence, and the method of biblical scholarship is, in my opinion, essential to an appreciation of what unfolds in subsequent chapters.

To present the reader with a book that is both faithful to the rigors of biblical scholarship and, at the same time, readable and engaging, I have focused on two issues:

First of all, I have developed somewhat detailed arguments for portions of the book in order to allow the reader to understand how an historical reconstruction is built upon the interpretation of relevant data. The work of biblical scholars is generally based on the study of original texts that require knowledge of ancient languages, minimally Hebrew and Greek, of which few laypersons have any comprehension. In the course of this volume, I will introduce some issues involving texts in their original languages in order to expose the reader to an understanding and an appreciation of the ways in which biblical scholars build detailed cases.

Secondly, I have in other instances avoided detailed arguments and discussion and have provided the reader instead with what are scholarly conclusions based on a careful reading of the evidence, at least as I understand the evidence and the consensus of sound scholarship. Without taking such shortcuts, it is simply not feasible to cover in detail one hundred and fifty years of history in a modest volume of the sort that I propose to offer here.

Nevertheless, my intention is to provide the reader with meaningful insight into both the methods of biblical scholarship and the results of the application of these methods to biblical texts in order to provide a reasoned and reasonable reconstruction of what likely happened in the earliest decades of the history of Christianity, which is after all our ultimate goal. Although not everyone will agree with my conclusions, hopefully all will agree with the value and the rigor of the method used to reach these conclusions. I hope that this blend of rigorous application of the historical method and introductory overviews of the history of early Christianity will stimulate the reader who wants more information about the subject to pursue individual issues in greater detail.

Writing an introduction means making compromises regarding what to include and what not to include, and I have made such compromises. I do not cover in detail every book of the New Testament, as most introductions attempt to do. I am more interested in addressing more deeply certain themes rather than in providing a summary of every book of the New Testament. In making the decisions I have made, I

hope to remain faithful to the text, to scholars who have written before me, and, most importantly, I hope to be faithful to the history that unfolded in the ancient past. It is essential in this regard to remind the reader that biblical scholarship is not an exact science in the way in which physics and astronomy are more-or-less exact sciences with strong foundations in mathematics.

The study of the origins of Judaism and Christianity is especially problematic, because the earliest periods of both religions are far removed from our earliest written sources, especially in the case of the Old Testament. We shall, in the course or what follows in this volume, have ample opportunity to understand the limitations of reconstructing the past.

The writing of history uses what we call the historical method, or the scientific method, and aims at objectivity to the extent that objectivity is possible in trying to reconstruct events that occurred thousands of years ago. Equally competent scholars often draw very different conclusions from the same evidence. The important word here is *evidence*. Ideally, scholars look at the same *evidence*, all of the available data, and at what other scholars have had to say in the past about that data. Then, and only then, do historians try to connect all of the dots in a way that is faithful both to the data and to the methodology of historical investigation. Scholars can do no more than draw conclusions within the limits of historical reason, but they can never be certain that their conclusions conform to what actually happened in the distant past. Rather scholars build models of the past or revisit and renovate models built by earlier scholars. The historical method is nothing more and nothing less; hence it is essential to understand at the outset the limits of the discipline.

Although the Bible represents both Israel's history and the history of early Christianity as "the acts of God," the doing of history is at all times a secular exercise. Accordingly, an historical study of the Bible poses serious concerns for many readers, because it is that impartial, detached, neutral, unbiased, dispassionate, and objective perspective that troubles some students of the text but that necessarily lies at the heart of all rigorous and serious biblical scholarship.

Although I am ultimately responsible for everything that I have gathered into this book, the final version is better because of the generous suggestions and criticisms of two good friends and colleagues: Marvin A. Breslow, professor emeritus of history at the University of Maryland and my roommate for four years at the Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; and David M. Reis, formerly visiting assistant professor of religion at Wells College, where we first met, and currently visiting assistant professor of religion at the University of Oregon, Eugene. Both of these men labored tirelessly and unselfishly over every word of every chapter and made invaluable contributions to this volume. Only I can appreciate the ways in which they have influenced both my thinking and my writing. I want also to acknowledge the tireless technical assistance I received at every stage of this project from Dimitrios Dimopoulos; I could not have prepared this manuscript without him.

This book is respectfully dedicated to the two professors who most influenced me in my graduate study of the New Testament at Harvard University many years ago: Helmut Koester and Krister Stendahl, brilliant scholars and great men both.

Arthur J. Bellinzoni

Professor Emeritus of Religion
Wells College
Aurora, New York

"The lot of historical writers is hard; for if they tell the truth they provoke men, and if they write what is false they offend God."

—Matthew Paris, 13th century English Benedictine monk

ABBREVIATIONS

SCRIPTURE ABBREVIATIONS

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Exod	Exodus	Song	Song of Solomon
Lev	Leviticus	Isa	Isaiah
Num	Numbers	Jer	Jeremiah
Deut	Deuteronomy	Lam	Lamentations
Josh	Joshua	Ezek	Ezekiel
Judg	Judges	Dan	Daniel
Ruth	Ruth	Hos	Hosea
1-2 Sam	1-2 Samuel	Joel	Joel
1-2 Kgs	1-2 Kings	Amos	Amos
1-2 Chr	1-2 Chronicles	Obad	Obadiah
Ezra	Ezra	Jonah	Jonah
Neh	Nehemiah	Mic	Micah
Esth	Esther	Nah	Nahum
Job	Job	Hab	Habakkuk
Ps (*pl* Pss)	Psalms	Zech	Zechariah
Prov	Proverbs	Mal	Malachi

New Testament

Matt	Mathew	Eph	Ephesians
Mark	Mark	Phil	Philippians
Luke	Luke	Col	Colossians
John	John	1-2 Thess	1-2 Thessalonians
Acts	Acts	1-2 Tim	1-2 Timothy
Rom	Romans	Titus	Titus
1-2 Cor	1-2 Corinthians	Phlm	Philemon
Gal	Galatians	Heb	Hebrews

Jas	James	Jude	Jude
1-2 Pet	1-2 Peter	Rev	Revelation
1-2-3 John	1-2-3 John		

Apocryphal Books

Tob	Tobit	Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah
Jdt	Judith	Sg Three	Song of the Three Jews
Add Esth	Additions to Esther	Sus	Susanna
Wis	Widsom of Solomon	Bel	Bel and the Dragon
Sir	Sirach	1-2 Macc	1-2 Maccabees
Bar	Baruch	3-4 Macc	3-4 Maccabees
1-3 Esd	1-3 Esdras	Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh

New Testament Aprocrypha and Church Fathers

Did	*Didache*	*Gos Pet*	*Gospel of Peter*
Gos Ebion	*Gospel of the Ebionites*	*Gos Truth*	*Gospel of Truth*
Gos Heb	*Gospel of the Hebews*	*Inf Jas*	*Infancy Gospel of James*
Gos Mary	*Gospel of Mary*	*Inf Thos*	*Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
Gos Thos	*Gospel of Thomas*		

Other Abbreviations

BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Of the Common Era
Oxyr Pap	Oxyrhynchus Papyrus

INTRODUCTION[1]

The term generally used for biblical scholarship in professional circles is "biblical criticism." The English word "criticism"—which has its roots in the Greek verb κρίνειν (*krinein*), meaning "to separate," "to think," "to discern," "to decide," "to distinguish," "to judge"—unfortunately conjures up the English word "criticize" with its connotations of attacking, subverting, or undermining. The intention of biblical scholarship is, however, not to criticize, to attack, to subvert, or to undermine the Bible. Rather, biblical scholarship endeavors to better understand the Bible, by using the same methodology that historians use when they investigate documents from ancient Greece, medieval Europe, or modern America. In other words, the goal of the historian is always the same: to analyze available evidence in order to make informed and discriminating judgments about the past.

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Already in antiquity, Jews and Christians applied critical methods to establish the canons of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) and of the New Testament. Ancient Jewish scribes were not only copyists, jurists, and lawyers; they were also teachers and scholars who established rules for copying manuscripts in a conscious effort to standardize biblical texts. Nevertheless, different versions of the books of the Hebrew Bible continued to exist as late as 70 CE[2] in manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and also in the so-called Septuagint, a translation into Greek of ancient Hebrew manuscripts undertaken in Alexandria, Egypt, ca. 250–150 BCE. It was likely sometime around 500 CE that the text of the Hebrew Bible was standardized by the scholars known as Masoretes, whose responsibility it was to maintain the

1. This chapter is revised from Arthur J. Bellinzoni, *The Old Testament: An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2009).

2. In using the designations BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (of the Common Era), I am using terminology that is more current and more inclusive than the designations BC (Before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*, in the year of the Lord), which are specifically Christian. There is, otherwise, no difference between BCE and BC, or between CE and AD.

tradition and rules that governed the production of all copies of the Hebrew Bible (the so-called Masoretic text, the basis of all modern Hebrew Bibles, or Old Testaments).

In the second and third centuries CE and even later, Fathers of the Christian Church exercised judgments when deciding which Christian writings to include in the canonical New Testament and whether to defend the authority of the Jewish Bible and include it in the Christian canon of sacred scripture. Accordingly, in one form or another, critical study of the Bible reaches back about two thousand years. Nonetheless, although Jewish scribes and early Christian Fathers were encouraged by intellectual curiosity, they were clearly motivated more by doctrinal presuppositions than by what we would consider today to be impartial inquiry and objective research.

Ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christian Fathers essentially assumed that individual books of the Old and New Testaments ultimately had God as their author, although they acknowledged several stages in the development of these books. First there was the divine utterance itself, the words that God actually spoke in the past; second, there was the hearing of that divine utterance by an inspired prophet or mediator chosen or otherwise designated by God to deliver his divine utterance to the people; and third, there was the faithful transcription of the prophet's or the mediator's words into writings by competent and trustworthy scribes, presumably under the inspiration of the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit, whose role it was to guarantee the authenticity and the accuracy of the written word and its faithfulness to the divine utterance. This process, it was believed, guaranteed the authenticity, the accuracy, and the authority of these writings as "holy books," set apart by God himself as the record of his message for the Jews, and later for Christians, and ultimately for the whole of humankind.

It is not sufficient to rely on the fanciful conjectures of ancient authors or even on long-standing traditions regarding such serious matters as the authorship and date of composition of ancient books. The criterion for such determination rests rather on a critical examination of internal evidence furnished by the individual books themselves and on relevant and available external evidence that can assist in the process of making informed judgments.

Many early Fathers of the Church were aware of problems that have become focuses of modern biblical scholarship. These men were, however, generally concerned with the content and the authority of the church's sacred scripture and, for the most part, simply accepted traditions of Judaism and of the early Christian church regarding matters of authorship, date, and place of composition of the books of the Bible.

In his monumental *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Robert Pfeiffer maintained that

> The crude beginnings of a critical and historical investigation of the Old Testament reach back at least to the second century of our era, when Celsus maintained that the Pentateuch could not have been written by a single author, and Ptolemy (a disciple of the Gnostic teacher Valentinus), in his epistle to Flora,

> distinguished in the Pentateuchal law parts inspired by God, parts written by Moses, and parts written by the elders.[3]

Pfeiffer notes that several ancient writers, some of them early Christian Fathers, made significant contributions to historical criticism of the Bible, but he confers especially strong praise on Porphyry:

> Porphyry, a Syrian Neoplatonist philosopher who lived in Alexandria (ca. 233–304), attacked the historicity of the Book of Daniel, proving conclusively that it was written in the Maccabean period, and that chapter 11 was not a prophecy, but a veiled history of Syria from Alexander to Antiochus Epiphanes.[4]

Likewise,

> Jerome (died 420) refused to commit himself to the view either that Moses wrote the Pentateuch or that Ezra published it, but by identifying Deuteronomy as the lawbook discovered in the Temple during the reign of Josiah (*Commentary on Ezekiel, ad* 1:1) he unwittingly found the key to Pentateuchal criticism.[5]

So too,

> Theodore of Mopsuestia, a theologian belonging to the school of Antioch (died ca. 428), not only perceived that the titles and superscriptions of the Psalms were added to the original compositions, but also that a number of psalms (seventeen, in his opinion) were Maccabean in date.[6]

In addition to these examples cited by Pfeiffer, Origen (185–254), one of the greatest of all Christian theologians, concluded on the basis of internal evidence, specifically stylistic criteria, that Paul was likely not the author of Hebrews (cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.25.11ff.), and Origen's disciple Dionysius of Alexandria (ca. 190–265) found linguistic and stylistic reasons to dismiss the traditional view that the apostle John was the author of the book of Revelation (Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 1).

These learned and critical Fathers of the Church were exceptions in their times, and there is no uninterrupted line of succession to connect them and their findings to modern biblical scholarship. Their observations had to be rediscovered many centuries later.

Modern biblical scholarship had its earliest foundations in the sixteenth century. The invention of printing about 1440, the advent of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, and the revival of scholarship during the Renaissance in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries all contributed to the rediscovery of a method that had long since been set aside, perhaps even forgotten. Print disseminated texts as never before, accelerating the spread of information.

3. Pfeiffer, *Introduction*, 43.
4. Ibid., 43.
5. Ibid., 43.
6. Ibid., 43.

The humanistic revival of critical scholarship meant that Europeans rediscovered and relearned biblical Hebrew, classical and biblical Greek, and other languages of the ancient Near East. The convergence of these movements resulted in the emergence and spread of modern biblical scholarship, although the road to the future proved to be extremely treacherous, because the Church surrendered authority in critical areas only after a series of fierce fights.

With a new focus on impartial inquiry, scholars for the first time asked with authority whether the beliefs and the practices of the medieval Roman Catholic Church reflected faithfully the beliefs and practices of their ancient forebears. With that question in his mind, Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers maintained that there should be a return to the authority of the scriptures and an abandonment of the authority heretofore vested in the church, most especially in the bishop of Rome, the Pope. The renewal of interest in the Old and New Testaments in their original Hebrew and Greek was imperative.

The German Protestant reformer Andreas Rudolph Bodenstein (1477–1541), known also as Andreas Carlstadt, or simply as Karlstadt after the city of his birth, presented theses denying free will as early as 1516. He asserted the doctrine of salvation by grace alone and was, by 1518, an ardent supporter of Martin Luther. Karlstadt was apparently the first person since Celsus and Jerome, more than a thousand years earlier, to break with the ancient tradition that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, because, he argued, the account of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34 is in the same style as the rest of the Pentateuch and could not have been written by Moses.

Louis Cappel (1585–1658), a French Protestant theologian and Hebrew scholar, was the first trained specialist who had the requisite skills and the courage to carry out, with meticulousness, insight, and reason, a systematic and linguistic investigation of the text of the Hebrew Bible. In his *Arcanum Punctationis Revelatum* (*The Secret of the Pointing Revealed*; 1624), Cappel proved that vowels had been added to the text of the Hebrew Bible during the Christian period and that until that time the text of the Hebrew Bible consisted only of consonants. In his *Critica Sacra* (*Sacred Literary Criticism*; 1650), Cappel proved that even the earlier consonantal text without vowel pointings had not been transmitted without errors and required correction with help from ancient translations as well as some measure of speculation on the part of biblical scholars.[7]

7. The Hebrew language is written from right to left and was originally written only with consonants. Vowel sounds between the consonants were understood but not written. Only later, when Hebrew was no longer a spoken language and when Jews spoke Aramaic, or Greek, or Latin, or some other vernacular language did rabbinic scholars add the requisite vowel signs to the Hebrew text in the form of dots and dashes above and below the consonants. These vowel pointings were standardized about 500 CE. Imagine the confusion in trying to understand an English text without vowels. For example, try to pronounce the English word NTRL. That could, of course, be NeuTRaL, or NaTuRaL, or even NoT ReaL, words with very different meanings, yet all written with the same consonants. The opportunity for confusion in reading a text without vowels is enormous. The adding of vowel pointings to the Hebrew Bible much later than when the books were originally written means that those

Jean Morin (1591–1659), a French Roman Catholic priest, has been called the most learned Roman Catholic author of the seventeenth century. Born a Calvinist, Morin converted to Roman Catholicism and in 1618 joined the Oratory at Paris. Several of Morin's writings address questions of the text of the Old Testament: *Exercitationes ecclesiastiae in utrumque Samaritorium Pentateuchum* (*Ecclesiastic Exercises in the Samaritan Pentateuch*; 1631), in which he argued that the Samaritan text and the Greek Septuagint are often superior to the extant Hebrew text of the Old Testament, a position he took up once again in his *Exercitationes biblicae de Hebraei Graecique textus sinceritate* (*Exercises Regarding the Reliability of the Text of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles*; 1663, 1669, 1686). Morin also published the text of the Greek Septuagint in *Biblia graecae sive Vetus testamentum secundum Septuaginta* (*The Greek Bible of the Old Testament According to the Septuagint*; 1628) and the text of the Hebrew-Samaritan Pentateuch in *Pentateuchus hebraeo-samaritanus* (*The Hebrew-Samaritan Pentateuch*; 1645) and *Pentateuchus samaritanus* (*The Samaritan Pentateuch*; 1645).

In 1637, French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) published *Discours de la Méthode* (*Discourse Concerning Method*), in which he elevated the principle of doubt to a valid historical, philosophical, and scientific principle. Descartes's approach involved three principles:

1. Man, as a thinking being, stands at the center of all investigation. Descartes's famous phrase *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) summarizes that standpoint.
2. Tradition alone is not a legitimate or convincing reason for acknowledging something as true. It is necessary to question everything except what is so patently obvious that there can be no reasonable basis for doubt.
3. Human reason is the one and only criterion of all truth.

A consequence of Descartes's philosophy was that human reason became a legitimate principle, indeed *the* legitimate principle, for examining religion and the Bible.

Frenchman Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676) published in Amsterdam in 1655 *Prae-Adamitae* (*Humans before Adam*), in which he concluded that the biblical time span of six thousand years since creation was insufficient to derive Turkish, Chinese, Arabic, and the European languages from a single original language. La Peyrère also argued that Adam was not the first man but merely the earliest ancestor of the Israelites. He also attacked, although only in passing, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

La Peyrère's work was considered heretical by the French clergy, by the faculty at the Sorbonne, and by the violent crowd that burned his book and that tried also to burn him—presumably just treatment for the first scientist to extend the age of the earth beyond the restrictive mathematics of the Bible. Religious orthodoxy responded predictably and dogmatically by requiring a *sacrificium intellectus*, a submission of the intellect or of reason to the authority of the Bible and the church. The argument was

later rabbinical scholars added the vowels that suited their understanding of the texts. There is, of course, no guarantee that their vowels reflected the intentions of the original authors.

made that fallen reason could serve as no guide to knowledge, and certainly not as a guide to sacred scripture.

In chapter 33 of *The Leviathan* (1660), English philosopher of natural law Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) summarized the purposes and the methods of the critical study of the Bible by asking such questions as: Who were the actual authors and what were the dates of composition of the several books of the Bible? How did the books of the New Testament gain authority as scripture, if not through the decisions of bishops assembled in 354 at the Council of Laodicea? How can we judge the source of the authority by which we interpret scripture? Hobbes concluded that Moses wrote only a few chapters of the book of Deuteronomy and that most of the books of the Old Testament were written following the Babylonian Exile in the late-sixth century BCE.

One of the most influential figures in the development of historical criticism of the Bible was the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), whose invaluable contribution to the subject appears in chapters 7–10 of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* [*Theological-Political Treatise*]. By the time of the publication of this work in 1670, there was nothing particularly new about the claim that Moses was not the author of the whole of the Pentateuch. What was new, however, was Spinoza's claim that the issue of authorship has major importance with regard to determining how scripture is to be understood and interpreted. Specifically, Spinoza was troubled by the fact that the scripture itself had become an object of veneration and that more attention was sometimes paid to the words on the printed page than to the message conveyed by those words.

Spinoza maintained that if the Bible is a historical (i.e. natural) document, then it should be examined like any other phenomenon. The study of the Bible should, therefore, be conducted as one would conduct the study of any other object in nature: by collecting and evaluating empirical data within the book itself and by then setting that data within the context of its time and place of composition.

Spinoza states his position clearly in chapter 7 of the *Tractatus*:

> I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it. For the method of interpreting Nature consists essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of the things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture. In this way—that is, by allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture—steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters that are known to us by the natural light of reason.[8]

8. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, 177.

In precisely the same way in which knowledge about nature is derived from nature alone, so too knowledge about scripture, for Spinoza, must be derived from scripture alone, and in both instances that is accomplished only through the clear and un-theological exercise of rational inquiry. Spinoza maintained that the universal message conveyed in the scripture was a simple moral message, namely, "to know and love God, and to love one's neighbor as oneself." This and this alone is the *true* word of God, and it lies unadulterated in a defective, flawed, distorted, and corrupted text (the Bible), articulated imperfectly and imprecisely in the words of men (the authors of the various books of the Bible). This simple message preserved within the Bible requires no philosophical or metaphysical speculation about the universe or about God; it requires no formal training in philosophy or history. "Scriptural doctrine," Spinzoa maintained, "contains not abstruse speculation or philosophic reasoning, but very simple matters able to be understood by the most sluggish mind."[9]

Another major figure in the emergence of biblical scholarship is Richard Simon (1638–1712), a French Roman Catholic priest and biblical scholar. Simon studied theology at Paris, where he developed an interest in Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern languages. Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (*Critical History of the Old Testament*; 1678, 1685) raised once again the question of whether Moses could have written material in the books traditionally attributed to him. Simon's views raised strong opposition within France leading to the issuance of a council of state that ordered the seizure and destruction of the total impression of thirteen hundred copies of Simon's book, and Simon himself was expelled by his colleagues from his religious order. The book was republished in the Netherlands in 1685. In his study, Simon called attention to the fact that there is sometimes more than one version of the same story and that these doublets show variations in their literary styles. Consequently, apart from the legal portions of the Pentateuch, which Simon attributed to Moses, the remainder of the Pentateuch was the work of several different authors.

Simon's study was in three volumes. The first dealt with issues of biblical scholarship, such as the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible from ancient until modern times and the question of the authorship of the Pentateuch and of other books of the Hebrew Bible. Volume 2 provided an account of the principal translations of the Old Testament, both ancient and modern. Volume 3 consisted of an examination of the Old Testament's principal commentators.

Although many critical positions had been advanced earlier by scholars such as Cappel and Morin, the special value of Simon's work was that it brought together in one place the established results of Old Testament scholarship up to his time. Simon's work provoked considerable hostility not only from the Roman Catholic Church but also from Protestants, who saw in Simon's work a frontal attack on their single most important stronghold, an infallible Bible. Simon responded to attacks leveled against his work in his *Réponse aux Sentiments de quelques théologiens de Hollande* (*Response*

9. Ibid.

to the Opinions of Some Theologians from Holland) (1685). Simon's later work consisted of his *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (*Critical History of the Text of the New Testament*; 1689), in which he discussed the origin and character of the various books of the New Testament, and by his *Histoire critique des versions du Nouveau Testament* (*Critical History of the Versions of the New Testament*; 1690), in which he provided an account of the various translations of the New Testament, both ancient and modern.

In 1693, Simon published what was perhaps his most valuable contribution to biblical scholarship, *Histoire critique des principaux commentateurs du Nouveau Testament depuis le commencement du Christianisme jusques à notre temps* (*Critical History of the Principal Commentators of the New Testament from the Beginning of Christianity until the Present Time*), and in 1695 he published *Nouvelles Observations sur le texte et les versions du Nouveau Testament* (*New Observations on the Text and the Versions of the New Testament*). Simon's contribution to the emerging discipline of biblical scholarship cannot be overestimated. Simon's use of internal evidence has led to his being regarded as the father of modern biblical criticism.

In addition to challenges from philosophy and from the emerging field of biblical scholarship, science began to deal a series of blows to the inerrancy of scripture. Although it was not intentional, a major assault on the Bible came in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the field of astronomy. Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) began his work on *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) in 1515, but it was not until 1543, the year of his death, that he published his findings and in a crushing blow displaced the earth, and therefore humankind, from the center of the universe, and even from the center of our solar system, and advanced the model of a heliocentric universe.

Italian philosopher, poet, and Roman Catholic priest Giordano (Filippo) Bruno (1548–1600) spread Copernicus's system as well as his own view that there were infinite worlds in the physical universe and that the stars are other suns. Bruno was rewarded for his work by being burned at the stake for heresy.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was an Italian mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, who published in 1632 *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (*Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief Systems of the World* [Ptolemaic and Copernican]). For his support of Copernicus's theory, Galileo was tortured at Rome both physically and mentally and remained under house arrest for the remainder of his life, ironically to be absolved by the Roman Catholic Church more than three hundred fifty years later in 1989.

Copernicus's model of the universe was substantially strengthened by German mathematician Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who was the first to recognize that the planets go around the sun in elliptical rather than in circular orbits. Kepler formulated the laws of planetary motion that describe mathematically the elliptical orbits of all celestial objects. By working independently of the Bible and the church, Copernicus,

Bruno, Galileo, and Kepler diminished significantly the influence of the Bible as a source for scientific knowledge.

As a result of the growing influence of reason during the seventeenth century, science, philosophy, and history began to emerge as separate and distinct branches of learning, increasingly independent of biblical and ecclesiastical authority. These new approaches to knowledge were certain to spill over increasingly into the field of biblical studies. Although the Bible was acknowledged as the final word in virtually all fields of knowledge at the beginning of the seventeenth century, by the end of that century the Bible's universal authority was being eroded, and it was being treated increasingly like any other historical document.

The eighteenth century brought additional support for the progressive views of these earlier scientists and scholars. In 1753, prominent French Roman Catholic physician Jean Astruc (1684–1766) published *Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux dont il paraît que Moïse s'est servi pour composer le livre de Genèse* (*Conjectures on the Original Memoirs that Moses Appears to Have Used in Composing the Book of Genesis*), in which he postulated the existence of two distinct sources in the book of Genesis, based on the alternating use of two names for God, one of which sources used Elohim, and the other Yahweh or Jehovah.

This thesis of two sources in the book of Genesis received little attention until Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) published the first great modern introduction to the Old Testament, his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 3 volumes; 1780–83). Eichhorn built on Astruc's hypothesis of two documents in Genesis and expanded the theory by noting that the separate documents have other characteristics, both literary and substantive, and applied his analysis of the sources to the whole of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Eichhorn's analysis was more radical than Astruc's because Eichhorn was also writing under the influence of eighteenth century German rationalism, English deism, and skepticism and was, therefore, asking questions and raising doubts much more penetrating than the relatively innocuous issue of multiple sources of the book of Genesis.

In doing so, Eichhorn may have been aware of the writings of Englishman Charles Blount (1654–1693), most especially his short pamphlet on the nature of miracles, *Miracles, No Violation of the Laws of Nature* (1683), the publication of which attracted a great deal of hostile criticism; and of Anthony Collins (1676–1729), an English theologian who defined the position of the English deists and defended the cause of rational theology in his *A Discourse Concerning Free-Thinking* (1713). In their writings, Blount and Collins dismissed out of hand specifically both miracles and predictive prophecy and, in addition, the authority of the Old Testament. The writings of Blount and Collins likely afforded Eichhorn the philosophical underpinning for his more radical positions on these issues.

It was, however, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), German philosopher, man of letters, and professor of Oriental languages, who first expressed an unequivocal and uncompromising opposition to the supernatural in the Bible. Reimarus studied theology, ancient languages, and philosophy and in 1720–21 visited Holland and England, where he likely encountered the English deist movement. Reimarus is best known for his *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (*Apology or Defense for the Rational Worshippers of God*), carefully withheld from publication during his lifetime, but from which, following his death, his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published several chapters under the title of *Fragmente eines Ungennannten* (*Anonymous Fragments*), generally referred to as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* (1778). The position of the *Apologie* is pure naturalistic deism, allowing for no miracles and no intrusion of the supernatural into the natural order. Natural religion advances everything that is the opposite of revealed religion and uses doubt with its rationalist presuppositions as the basic principle of all historical investigation. The basic Truths of this natural religion are the existence of a good and wise Creator and the immortality of the human soul, truths that are discoverable only on the basis of human reason and that can and should constitute the foundation of universal religion.

Reimarus's work is the starting point of Albert Schweitzer's masterpiece *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1968) (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906 [*From Reimarus to Wrede* is the title in the original German]). Schweitzer opens his chapter on Reimarus with these words: "Before Reimarus, no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus."[10] Reimarus's bold work was the first effort to apply systematically and consistently the tools of historical criticism to the life of Jesus, and its results were devastating to Christian orthodoxy of the time. According to Schweitzer, Reimarus stated "we are justified in drawing an absolute distinction between the teaching of the Apostles in their writings and what Jesus Himself in His own lifetime proclaimed and taught."[11] Schweitzer goes on to state: "What belongs to the teaching of Jesus is clearly to be recognized. It is contained in two phrases of identical meaning, 'Repent, and believe in the Gospel,' or, as it is put elsewhere, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.'"[12] According to Reimarus, Jesus took his personal stand within first-century Judaism and accepted its Messianic expectations without modifying or correcting them in any way. What is new in Jesus' teaching is the timetable, namely, that the arrival of the Kingdom (or Rule) of God was imminent.

According to Reimarus, Jesus had no intention of setting aside Judaism and putting a new religion, Christianity, in its place. Drawing a clue from the difficulty that the Easter event was first proclaimed at Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' death, Reimarus came to the conclusion that following Jesus' unexpected and inexplicable death, his disciples stole his body, hid it, and proclaimed a spiritual resurrection as well as

10. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 13.
11. Ibid., 16.
12. Ibid., 16.

Jesus' second coming in glory in the very near future. It is no wonder that Reimarus chose not to publish his work during his lifetime; his conclusions struck at the very heart of Christianity.

In spite of Reimarus's sometimes far-fetched conclusions, his work is extraordinarily significant because of his remarkable eye for detail and his systematic application of the principle of historical reason to the texts of the canonical gospels. Many of Reimarus's insights still remain at the center of biblical scholarship two hundred fifty years after his death: the understanding of Jesus as an eschatological prophet; the problem of the Messianic Secret; the difficulties associated with Jesus' prediction of his own passion, death, and resurrection, the *miracle stories* of the gospels as opposed to the *miracles* of Jesus, the striking difference between the Jesus of the gospel of John and the Jesus of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and much more.

Reimarus's work was followed by a series of rationalist lives of Jesus to which Schweitzer devotes several chapters in his *Quest*. It was, however, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) who provided for New Testament scholars a critical key that is essentially still a working principle of contemporary biblical scholarship. "Religion," Strauss maintained, "is not concerned with supra-mundane beings and a divinely glorious future, but with present spiritual realities which appear as 'moments' in the eternal being and becoming of Absolute Spirit."[13] Strauss maintained "immortality is not something which stretches out into the future, but simply and solely the present quality of the spirit, its inner universality, its power of rising above everything finite to the Idea."[14]

Strauss's masterpiece, *Das Leben-Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*), published in two volumes of 1,480 pages in 1835 and 1836, when Strauss was still in his twenties, is one of the most brilliant works in the entire corpus of biblical scholarship. Although the concept of myth had frequently been applied by scholars to the Old Testament, prior to the work of David Friedrich Strauss it had never been fully appreciated or consistently applied to the life of Jesus. The word myth was, and to many Christians still is, an offense to religious belief. However, as used by Strauss, religious myth is "nothing else than the clothing in historic form of religious ideas, shaped by the unconscious power of legend, and embodied in a historic personality."[15]

For Strauss, Christianity introduced into history the Idea of God-manhood as that idea was realized and expressed in the historical personality of Jesus of Nazareth. For early Christians, it was frankly impossible to advance a purely historical representation of Jesus, because the early church was confident that Jesus was the incarnation of God-manhood, an ideal that, they believed, is now open to everyone and that remains the ultimate goal of all humanity. As a thoroughgoing Hegelian, Strauss sought, through his mythological interpretation of the New Testament, to bring together and synthesize the *thesis*, as represented by the supernaturalistic explanation of the Bible,

13. Ibid., 73.
14. Ibid., 73.
15. Ibid., 79.

with its opposite or *antithesis*, as represented by the rationalistic interpretation of the Bible, both of which were in Strauss's opinion unacceptable ways of reading and understanding the text.

For Strauss, all of the stories relating to Jesus before his baptism are myths, woven on Old Testament prototypes. As for the accounts of the baptism of Jesus in the four gospels, the historical residue of these stories is only that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and was, for a period of time, probably a disciple of John. In their present forms, however, the stories of Jesus' baptism serve to state that either for Jesus or more likely for the early church, the baptism was the moment in Jesus' life in which his messiahship either dawned on him, or served, more probably, as the moment from which Jesus' messiahship was traced by his followers. So too the story of the temptation of Jesus is primitive Christian legend, woven out of stories from the Old Testament, designed to show Jesus' inner struggle concerning his own self-identity.

As for the healing miracles, some of them may have their roots in actual exorcisms that Jesus performed, but in their present form, in which evil spirits or demons recognize Jesus as Messiah, these stories reflect the church's effort to show that the supernatural powers of evil recognized and submitted themselves to Jesus' supernatural power during his lifetime. Reports of healings of the blind, of the deaf, of paralytics, of the dumb, and raisings of the dead belong to the expectations of contemporary Judaism regarding what will transpire in the Messianic age and have their roots not in history, but in passages in the Old Testament (e.g. Isa 35:5–6a, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy").

Strauss maintained, moreover, that the stories of the resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples and to others are all mythical. Matthew knew of such appearances only in Galilee, Luke of appearances only in Jerusalem, and Mark of no appearances at all. For Strauss, if there were appearances of the risen Lord, then he had, indeed, not died; and if Jesus had actually died, then there were, pure and simple, no such appearances. The mythical character of the ascension into heaven is, for Strauss, self-evident.

What Strauss did, story by story, gospel by gospel, was to demonstrate down to the most minute detail that what we have in the gospels of the New Testament are not reliably historical accounts of virgin births, theophanies at baptisms, healings of the sick, and raisings of the dead, culminating in Jesus' own resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. Rather what we have are "stories" that *clothe in historical form* the Church's claim or idea that Jesus was a divinely ordained messenger of God. The *stories about Jesus* in the gospels are the "historicizing" of that Idea.

Going a step farther, Strauss was the first to take the position that the Gospel of John has little historical value. The Jesus of the Gospel of John is dominated by the theological conviction of the early church. Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in which history is carefully interwoven with myth, in John there is little more than dogma pretending to be history:

> John represents a more advanced stage in the mythopoeic process, inasmuch as he has substituted for the Jewish Messianic conception, the Greek metaphysical conception of the Divine Sonship, and, on the basis of his acquaintance with the Alexandrian Logos doctrine, even makes Jesus apply to Himself the Greek speculative conception of pre-existence.[16]

It has not been my purpose in this section to trace the long and detailed history of the emergence of modern biblical scholarship.[17] I have, however, tried to point to some of the major players who made particularly significant contributions to the emergence of the modern method of biblical scholarship with its deference to rationalism as the primary criterion of historical reason.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD

As we have already seen, the historical method (or what I prefer to call the tools of biblical scholarship) emerged and evolved over a period of several centuries and in the larger context of learning nourished by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Age of Reason.[18] However, the basic tenets of that method, the canons of biblical scholarship, have been firmly in place for more than a century, although some scholars and many Christians refuse to acknowledge that fact. Although the war is over, the battle against biblical scholarship rages on in some quarters because of the perceived threat of biblical scholarship to Christian orthodoxy.

Before the rules of biblical scholarship were entirely clear, a number of smaller streams had to flow into a single great river. The first and the simplest of these small streams was an examination of internal evidence within the books of the Bible themselves. That methodology was already evident almost two thousand years ago in the early work of Celsus, Ptolemy, Porphyry, Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Origen, and Dionysius of Alexandria. The findings of these men had to be rediscovered, relearned, and further developed in the last few centuries. That work began with Karlstadt in Germany in the early sixteenth century, and continued with Cappel, Morin, and La Peyrère in France in the seventeenth century. Even Hobbes writing in England in the seventeenth century built his arguments essentially on an examination of evidence internal to the Bible.

16. Ibid., 86.

17. A good summary of that history can be found in succinct form in Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*.

18. The reader can find a brilliant and comprehensive treatment of the history of Western thought in Tarnas's *Passion of the Western Mind*. Of special interest for our purposes here is chapter 5: "The Modern World View," in which Tarnas discusses the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Philosophical Revolution, Foundations of the Modern World View, and the Triumph of Secularism. What Tarnas accomplishes in five hundred pages is monumental and far more than I can hope to communicate in a short chapter.

It was likely Spinoza, a Portuguese Jew, born and raised in Amsterdam, who first understood the importance of examining the Bible as one would study any other object in nature. Spinoza appealed to much more than the issue of internal evidence. He claimed that the Bible was a collection of books written by men and that it was, therefore, subject to the same vicissitudes as any other human endeavor. The Bible is simply one more object within the natural order.

In the late-eighteenth century in his introduction to the Old Testament, Eichhorn embraced for the first time the systematic philosophical perspective of German rationalism and English deism. At about the same time, Lessing published Reimarus's application of an unequivocal opposition to supernaturalism to the books of the New Testament and, more specifically, to the life of Jesus. The final nails were being hammered into the coffin of the old order of biblical interpretation. The rules of biblical scholarship were changing dramatically; they now had an uncompromising philosophical foundation: rationalism.

To understand the significance of this final blow to the old order, it is important to look briefly at the foundational contribution of movements variously called German rationalism, the German Enlightenment, English deism, and skepticism to see how they collectively provided the philosophical underpinning for modern biblical scholarship. German scholarship began to question and eventually to reject the divine authority of the traditional canon of the Bible and, more specifically, the inspiration and presumed correctness of the texts of the Old and New Testaments. It questioned whether it was appropriate to equate scripture with revelation.

The term Rationalism was used to designate the view that human reason, or human understanding, is the sole source, the final test, and the competent judge of all truth. As these insights invaded the study of the Bible, this seemly destructive criticism was leveled especially against the miracles recorded in the Bible and against the inerrancy and authenticity of the scriptures. Most specifically, David Hume (1711–76) directed his celebrated critique of miracles against the justification of religion by any means other than the rational. Hume weighed the possibility of error on the part of the observer of miracles or the historian against the possibility of miraculous occurrences themselves.[19] Human experience, affected by ignorance, fancy, and the imaginings of fear and hope, explains sufficiently the growth of religion and the presence of the element of the miraculous and the supernatural in virtually all religious traditions.

Once the special authority of the Bible had been questioned and its place in the natural order firmly established, it was essential to understand more clearly the original meanings of the ancient texts in their ancient contexts. Scholars understood that

19. Trying to find historical evidence to support the miracles of the Bible is like trying to find evidence to refute Darwin. The methodology of much evangelical Christian biblical scholarship is the historical equivalent of intelligent design in the realm of natural science. There is no distinction between bad biblical scholarship and bad science, because the presuppositions of biblical historians and of all historians and of all scientists are and must remain essentially the same. All employ a "scientific" (i.e., a secular, naturalist, non-supernatural) methodology in their work.

a detached and objective reading of the Bible, free from dogmatic preconceptions and with special attention to the ancient languages and the original historical circumstances, would alone produce a more informed and less biased reconstruction and appreciation of the origins of ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Once scholars had established the principle that ancient documents should be examined in their own historical contexts, in a spirit of impartial inquiry and total freedom without predisposition or prejudice, it was only a matter of time until the methodology and tools of modern biblical scholarship emerged.

By the nineteenth century, archeological discoveries in Palestine, Egypt, and Mesopotamia and the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs and ancient cuneiform[20] scripts aroused even greater interest in setting the Bible and biblical religion within the historical, social, and religious contexts of the ancient Near East. Scholars soon understood that ancient Israelite religion could and should be understood within the larger context of ancient Semitic religions and that early Christianity could and should be understood within the historical, social, and religious contexts of the Greco-Roman Hellenistic world. The issue of *contextuality* was paramount to the new method. It was evident that it was essential to look at the Bible itself and the historical figures in the biblical narratives within the historical, social, and religious contexts of the world in which these individuals lived and out of which these written documents arose.

It was suddenly obvious that each of the sixty-six books of the Christian Bible (thirty-nine from the Old Testament and twenty-seven from the New Testament) had its own unique history. Each of the sixty-six books was written in a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular author, and for a particular purpose, and it fell to historians to develop the particular tools and skills needed to discover the origin and history of each book.

Ulrich Wilckens has provided an excellent formal definition of the historical method of biblical scholarship:

> The only scientifically responsible interpretation of the Bible is that investigation of the biblical texts that, with a methodologically consistent use of historical understanding in the present state of its art, seeks via reconstruction to recognize and describe the meaning these texts have had in the context of the tradition history of early [Judaism and] Christianity.[21]

In other words, biblical scholarship is committed to providing a systematic statement of what probably happened in the past after assessing carefully and objectively the authenticity, the reliability, and the veridicality of the ancient sources, free from centuries of interpretative theological overlay. The biblical scholar must be a person

20. Cuneiform refers to the wedge-shaped characters in the inscriptions of ancient Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. It is the method of writing, not a particular language, just as many people in the world use the convention of the Roman alphabet to write their own individual languages.

21. Wilckens, *The Historical Method*, 33.

of integrity with a passionate and unqualified commitment to the truth, wherever that may lead.

Before proceeding to discuss the rules of evidence for what I consider sound biblical scholarship, it might be helpful to clarify what does and what does not constitute the purview of biblical scholarship by focusing on just two examples: one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

However much evidence conservative Jewish or Christian scholars may muster to argue that God led the people of Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus, the exercise is doomed to failure. No body of evidence can possibly authenticate an act of God, or even the purported "events" described in the book of Exodus. Historians can establish the likelihood that there was an escape from Egypt by a relatively small band of Hebrew slaves, but the magnitude of the event as described in Exodus falls beyond the purview of the historian, who cannot deal with miraculous crossings of seas or with voices from burning bushes, as if they were actual events subject to verification or falsification. They are the language of ancient myth. At best historians can discuss the ways in which a simple event might have been interpreted by Moses and others as an act of Israel's God Yahweh and how such a simple event was exaggerated in the oral retelling and subsequently by authors in their writings. Scholars can discuss the biblical accounts of the exodus, but they can never know from those accounts that they reflect a reliable retelling of what actually happened.

Likewise no body of evidence can ever establish the historicity of Jesus' birth from a virgin. Science dictates that all children are born of a mother and a father, and there is a great deal of evidence in the New Testament that suggests, in fact, that Mary and Joseph were Jesus' biological parents. Historians can also speculate about how and why the early Church initially created oral traditions and then somewhat later written accounts in two different gospels, Matthew and Luke (which, by the way, disagree in significant details as to what is purported to have "happened"). What we have in the early chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke are *birth narratives* that demand our attention, but we obviously do not have *reliable accounts* of Jesus' birth. There is a fundamental difference between *miracle stories* and *miracles*. The latter falls totally outside the purview of the historian, who would properly characterize such *stories* as legends that served a particular purpose for early Christian communities.

THE RULES OF EVIDENCE

It should be eminently clear that biblical scholars make no assumptions about the Bible except that they are committed to studying its books in the same manner in which they would study any literature from antiquity, or from any other period. Indeed, because the Bible focuses on *history* and purports to tells the *story* of God's active involvement in *history*, then *history* must be a primary concern, a sine qua

non, for anyone who wants to understand the Bible in as full and objective a way as is humanly possible.

Biblical scholars apply to the books of the Bible the same critical tools that they would apply to any writing that is a human production. In doing so, scholars apply greater value to evidence found within the books themselves than they do to external traditions *about* the Bible, which are generally considerably later than the writing of the books themselves and which often reflect the biases of subsequent generations.

Scholars assume that the books of the Bible were composed by men in specific historical environments of both time and place and that those documents will, therefore, almost always betray some evidence about the time and place of their composition. It is essential to acknowledge that these ancient documents will reflect methods of composition and worldviews contemporary with the world in which they arose and that those methods of composition and those worldviews will be substantially alien to our own. This simple fact means that the reader will have to try to place himself or herself into the time and place in which these books were written in order to be able to understand them properly.

Biblical scholars have determined that there are vast differences in the historical value of the books of the Old and New Testaments, and even differences within specific books insofar as history is the paramount concern. Having said that, it is important to lay out the rules and criteria whereby we can reasonably determine what likely did and did not happen in the ancient past. That is, however, not an easy task, and equally competent unbiased scholars will sometimes examine the same evidence and come to very different conclusions. The problem sometimes lies in the inadequacy or the insufficiency of the evidence, when drawing conclusions leaves a great deal of room for reasonable doubt. We shall, therefore, often speak about what is probable and even possible *within the limits of historical reason*.

Whatever else there may be in the sixty-six books that Christians call their canon of sacred Scripture, there is a human component, and that human component suffers from the same limitations, deficiencies, shortcomings, errors, and biases that we find in any body of literature from which we attempt to reconstruct what likely happened at some time in the past, in our case at various times in the very distant past. That endeavor poses enormous but not insurmountable challenges. It is, however, essential to approach our task with a measure of humility, because there is so much that we do not know and will probably never know with any degree of certainty.

Biblical scholars with a strong personal religious predisposition sometimes fall into the trap of exercising the principles of biblical criticism until they reach the point where the application of rationalist principles appears to conflict with what they consider revealed truth. For the historian as historian, nothing, not even so-called "revealed truth," can stand in the way of the consistent application of the canons of historical reason. There are no exceptions, no exemptions, no bending of the rules, and no retreating from the consistent application of the principles of historical reason.

At this juncture, it is important to state clearly and unequivocally that history and theology are by no means the same. The historian attempts to reconstruct the past; the theologian tries to identify and unfold the meaning and relevance of the texts. Although the two are closely interrelated, they are distinct. Our purpose in this volume will be to focus exclusively on the question of history, what we can and cannot know, and with what measure of certainty.

Whatever the historian's particular subject matter, history is much more than a simple retelling of what is written in the sources. History is a narrative account of the past, based on the sources, but only after their reliability, their competence, their authenticity, their truthfulness, and their clarity have been carefully examined and critically questioned. Biblical scholars must hone their analytical acumen in examining and evaluating the relevant biblical and non-biblical texts in order to provide the best possible explanation of what happened in the past.

In order to appreciate better the methodology used by biblical scholars, let me by analogy consider the example of the courtroom, because historical sources are like witnesses in a courtroom and must be questioned and have their testimony evaluated. John Smith is on trial for murdering Mary Jones, and you, the reader, are a member of the jury. It is, on the one hand, the burden of the state, through the office of the district attorney, to set forth persuasively the evidence needed to convince you and the other jurors that John is guilty. It is, on the other hand, the responsibility of John's defense attorney to cast doubt in the minds of the jurors that John is, in fact, guilty. Typically, witnesses are introduced, examined, and cross-examined to build the case and to influence the jury. Wherever appropriate, physical evidence is admitted for consideration. In the end, the jurors retreat to the privacy of a room, where they are expected to discuss and evaluate the evidence and ultimately to pass judgment on John's guilt, which the state must establish in their minds *beyond reasonable doubt*.

The standard by which the historian makes judgments is understandably less than the courtroom threshold of *beyond reasonable doubt*. Nevertheless, the principle for making judgments is basically the same: to collect and evaluate the evidence (the witnesses) impartially and without bias in order to make an informed and reasoned decision or determination about what actually happened at some time in the past.

Just as there are basic rules of evidence in the courtroom, so too there are basic rules of evidence for the historian as well. Typically, historians, in dealing with a primary source, ask of that source the *who*, the *where*, the *when*, and the *why* questions. To use the book of the Gospel of Matthew as an example, is there either internal or external evidence that enables the historian to determine *where*, *when*, *why*, and *by whom* the Gospel of Matthew was written?

The time and place criterion generally affirms that the closer in time and place a source or the author of a source is to an event, the more reliable that source is likely to be. Conversely, the farther in time and place a source or the author of a source is from an event, the less reliable that source is likely to be. The historian looks for

direct testimony of an event. Most reliable are accounts from multiple independent eyewitnesses. Next in reliability would be accounts of an event, created after the event itself, by multiple individuals who themselves had direct access to independent eyewitnesses to the actual event. Obviously, the farther removed a source is from the purported event, the less reliable the testimony is likely to be.

A second criterion to which historians generally appeal is the bias rule. Every source is biased in some way. Documents invariably tell us what the author of the document thought happened, or perhaps in all too many instances what the author of the document wanted his audience to believe happened. Accordingly, every source and every piece of evidence must be examined critically and skeptically. No evidence and no testimony can be taken entirely at its face value, especially evidence or testimony whose primary purpose is to advance the agenda of the witness (or the author) or the agenda of the in-group to which the source is addressed. The Bible is especially problematic in this regard, because it is a collection of in-group writings for in-group readers and does not purport to be objective.

Wherever possible, evidence from external written sources and circumstantial evidence, such as linguistic studies and archaeological data, can and should be called upon to confirm or to question what we find in our biblical sources. Fortunately, we have many written sources from ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, ancient Canaan, and the Greco-Roman world, which enable us to read the Old and New Testaments against the background and within the context of ancient Near Eastern history, religion, and culture. In addition, we now know much more about the languages of the ancient world and we have substantial raw data from archaeological excavations that we can use as objective, perhaps even scientific and unbiased, evidence in reconstructing the past.

We are in a better position today than we have ever been before to understand the Bible. It would appear, therefore, that we have an obligation to use all of the available methodologies and tools to the fullest extent possible in order to place our feet firmly on as solid a foundation of history as is humanly reasonable. What distinguishes the Bible from most other great religious literature is that throughout the sixty-six books, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible claims that God has revealed himself in *history*. History is, therefore, paramount for both Jews and Christians, and a clear understanding of the ancient history can and will only enrich our understanding of the origins of both Judaism and Christianity. Faith is, of course, very different from history and science. Nevertheless, history can and should afford an important corrective to unexamined and uncritical religious faith.

Throughout this volume, I will be applying the basic principles of the historical method of biblical scholarship and the rules of evidence as outlined above. I hope to show how these principles work by applying them to particular stories and traditions. At times, I will also introduce or allude to additional principles or criteria that have guided biblical scholars in their efforts to reconstruct the past. At every step,

our single-minded objective must always be a quest for the truth—an honest reconstruction of the past within the limits of historical reason. That quest will sometimes lead us to likely conclusions, sometimes to possible conclusions, and sometimes to no conclusion at all. We must be prepared to know when there is not sufficient evidence to know what happened in the past, just as there is in the courtroom sometimes insufficient evidence to convict a suspect. My goal in this volume is to lead the reader, wherever possible, through the method of biblical scholarship to what I consider the best conclusions based on a rigorous application of that method.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I examined the ways in which the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment increasingly gave rise to reason as the single most important criterion in the search for truth. It was inevitable that the fundamental principles that surfaced as a result of the human effort to understand the universe, our own earth, and human history should and would eventually be applied to a study of the world's religions, an more specifically to a study of the Bible, the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and the history of Christianity.

We have seen that the historical-critical method, as it has evolved and matured in the course of the human endeavor to understand the beginnings of Christianity, employs unreservedly and unconditionally the same secular methodology that is appropriate to the historical study of any period of history. Why would historians use a different methodology to study the life and ministry of Jesus and the origins of Christianity than they use to study the history of the ancient Mediterranean world of which Christianity was, at least initially, a relatively small part? Why would historians of religion use a different methodology to study the Tao Te Ching, the Bhagavad Gita, the Qu'ran, and the New Testament or to understand the lives and teachings of Confucius, Moses, Lao Tzu, Mohammed, and Jesus? The rules of historical investigation are obviously the same whatever the subject matter.

As we have observed, it was in the eighteenth century that the historical method first forged a serious and consistent path into the study of the New Testament with the appearance of Herman Samuel Reimarus's *Fragmente eines Ungenannten* (*Fragments of an Unknown Writer*), published posthumously by Reimarus's friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing between 1774 and 1778.

Reimarus made it eminently clear that many of the fundamental claims of Christianity lie outside the realm of historical reason and require an alternative, a rational explanation. Most specifically, Reimarus made it clear that there is no way for historians, as historians, to deal with *miracles* or *resurrections*. Such presumed "events" are, in fact, faith claims that cannot be regarded as representations of what actually happened in the past. What we have here are *stories*, not *events*; what we have are early

Christian *written accounts* of what the early church wanted its followers to believe about Jesus of Nazareth.

In the shadow of the Enlightenment, the intellectual revolution of the nineteenth century changed forever all thought and all study on just about every subject. Geology provided indisputable proof for the antiquity of the earth and of most animal species, including our own species, *homo sapiens*. By the end of the nineteenth century Charles Darwin's theory of evolution based on the mechanism of natural selection was commonplace not only in scientific circles but in educated circles in Europe and America. The fierce debate that had sometimes raged between religion and science throughout much of the nineteenth century died down toward the end of the century with science the clear and unmistakable, if not undisputed, victor. Although the war is over, the battle still rages on, especially in the United States, in evangelical Christian circles.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of nineteenth century biblical scholarship for the contribution it made to the emerging methodology. Historical criticism became the only approved method of investigation and brought about a revolutionary change in the way in which the Bible is studied. The Bible, Jesus of Nazareth, and the two-thousand-year history of the Christian church had, effectively, been secularized and humanized, and there was no turning back. The books of the Bible were no longer simply sacred scriptures; they were very old documents that required secular study and analysis like every other ancient written source. The Bible was no longer the undisputed solitary criterion for the writing of history. Rather the historical method was now the single undisputed criterion for understanding the Bible. By the end of the nineteen century, Jesus of Nazareth was clearly and unequivocally a man to be studied, analyzed, and examined by using the critical tools of historical reason. Scholars had clearly embarked on a rigorous quest for the historical Jesus as someone distinct from the Christ of Christian faith.

Biblical scholars, educated clergy, and enlightened laypersons had come to an understanding that historical analysis of the Bible is not the same as the retelling of Bible stories. An historical analysis of the New Testament attempts to provide an objective narrative based on what the sources say, but only after their competence, their reliability, and their intelligibility have been scrupulously and meticulously examined, scrutinized, analyzed, and probed. Like a prosecuting attorney in a courtroom, the historian of the New Testament rigorously cross-examines and questions each and every witness or piece of evidence to determine within the limits of historical reason what may have actually happened in the course of the life and ministry of Jesus. Biblical scholarship is analytical and objective, systematic and methodical, because it uses all of the resources of the human mind to investigate all of the available evidence.

The historical-critical method effectively excludes the biblical view of a personal God who intervenes in human history. Such a preconception is an unacceptable and unscientific explanation for something that happened at some time in the distant past, just as it would be unsuitable to explain such an event in our contemporary

world. That is the one simple and inviolable canon for the writing of any history—even the history of Christianity. The objective of all history is to promote a body of acknowledged and reputable information that addresses the question "What *actually* happened, when did it happen, and why did it happen?" What, when, and why are the focus of all historical investigation.

An historian cannot, of course, know all that there is to know about any subject or about any single event, however limited the focus might be. The historian is always limited by the reliability of the available evidence, the literary sources, and other data to which we have access. The goal of the biblical historian is to advance a body of information arranged in a narrative that provides an account, an explanation, and an interpretation of the past.

Simply stated, historical criticism is a process for (1) assembling all possible witnesses to an event, both oral and written sources; (2) assessing the value of these witnesses with the help of every available critical tool; (3) linking the data into a single coherent and consistent arrangement; and (4) advancing a conclusion, together with all its supporting evidence, in the form of a narrative. The art of collecting, evaluating, connecting, and presenting evidence is what we call historical criticism. This process constitutes the writing of most, if not all, history.

A good historian looks for every possible explanation for and interpretation of the significant data, looks at the facts in the light of various explanations and interpretations, and then eliminates the explanations and interpretations that fail to account adequately for the data. The explanation and interpretation of the data that best answers all of the questions and that deals most faithfully, most truthfully, and most objectively with all of the data is generally the best possible explanation. In drawing conclusions, the responsible historian presents the narrative explanation and interpretation with supporting information.

Clearly the good historian is a person of honesty and integrity, with no personal agenda, and with an uncompromising passion for the truth for its own sake. The goal of history is quite simply to advance the truth about the past. In addition, because the writing of history does not have the objectivity and precision of the physical and mathematical sciences, historians must have balance and humility and not overdraw their conclusions.

Fortunately, historians of the New Testament have developed several distinctive and specialized tools to assist them in their effort to reconstruct the past. It is essential in the next few chapters to introduce the reader to some of these basic tools and methods that are available to both amateur and professional students of the New Testament alike, as they attempt to understand better the life and ministry of Jesus and the history of early Christianity. We shall begin our study with an examination of textual criticism, philological study, literary criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism.

CHAPTER 1

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Many years ago I attended a school board meeting with a group of citizens who were there to support the continued teaching of foreign languages in our local high school curriculum. In the course of the meeting, a gentleman stood up and said, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for my kids." My friends and I looked at one another and knew that we had lost the day.

The truth of the matter is that Jesus did not speak English; neither was the New Testament written originally in English. Jesus spoke an ancient Semitic language called Aramaic, and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were all written originally in Greek.

Readers who pick up the New Testament and open to the first book, the Gospel of Matthew, generally take for granted that they are reading a reliable English translation of an original Greek text written almost two thousand years ago by one of Jesus' twelve chosen apostles, Matthew, an eye-witness to events in the life and ministry of Jesus. The same might be said about the Gospel of John. The gospels of Mark and Luke, on the other hand, presumably reflect the teachings of disciples of Jesus' original twelve apostles—the author of the Gospel of Mark being a disciple of the apostle Peter, and the author of the Gospel of Luke being a disciple of Paul, who became an apostle of Jesus a few years after Jesus' death, when the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

The issue is, however, far more complicated than what most ingenuously assume. The four canonical gospels are actually all anonymous writings. Their ascription to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John probably came much later than at the time of their original composition, likely as the result of a conscious effort on the part of some within the Christian community to assign to these books apostolic authority at a time when their actual authorship was unknown or had been forgotten.

The fact that we do not have the original text of the gospels, the so-called autographs, is even more disconcerting. What we do have are much later copies, usually several generations or even several centuries removed from the writing of the autographs. In fact, we have many thousands of ancient manuscripts of the books of the New Testament.

Still more troubling, it appears that each scribe, each copyist along the way, took lesser or greater liberties in editing and rewriting what he was copying. Just how much editing was done by the earliest scribes in the first century or two of the transmission of the books of the New Testament is not clear, but it is evident that most of the textual changes with which we are familiar were made during the second and third centuries, a time in which Christianity was still diverse and wide-ranging and in which some within the church were taking initial steps toward the establishment of a Christian orthodoxy. In fact, the freedom with which the books of the New Testament were reproduced after their original composition may have been considerable in the earliest decades of their transmission during the time before these books were considered "authoritative," long before they constituted the books of the canonical New Testament.

WHAT IS TEXTUAL CRITICISM?

To remind the reader of the opening paragraph of the Introduction, biblical criticism is the commonly used term for professional biblical scholarship. The term is neutral and does not suggest attack. It does, however, mean the employment of the same scholarly methods and tools that are used to examine historical documents everywhere. Textual Criticism is the particular scholarly discipline that has developed both the principles and the tools required to establish the best and most accurate Greek text of the twenty-seven books of the canonical New Testament.

That process is far more challenging than most readers of the New Testament realize. The discipline involves scrutinizing the ancient New Testament manuscript evidence in order to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the texts of the books of the New Testament in the forms they had when they left the hands of their original authors.

Modern textual criticism originated and evolved to assist scholars in recreating from the myriad of different manuscripts a working Greek text of the New Testament as close as possible to the autograph, the earliest or original text of each book. Regrettably, we do not have access to the autographs themselves. They were presumably lost in the first decades after they were composed. What we do have in their stead are copies of copies of copies, etc., of which, in the case of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, no two are identical. Scholars must, therefore, attempt to reconstruct the autograph from later imperfect and sometimes widely divergent manuscripts.

Textual criticism is, of course, a challenge not only for the books of the New Testament but for virtually all ancient literature. The major difference is that there are many more manuscripts of the books of the New Testament than there are of any other writings from classical antiquity, making the task of reconstructing autographs of the books of the New Testament more challenging. Textual criticism also reveals the mutability with which ancient Christian copyists approached their texts, especially

prior to the time they were regarded as canonical. It is important to acknowledge the simple fact that Christians did not begin to think of their texts as "static" or canonical until about 200 CE.

It is relatively easy to speculate about how differences in the manuscript tradition may have developed. We know, for example, that during early Christian worship services someone occasionally read from a letter of Paul or from one of the gospels. A Christian visiting from another church might decide to make or otherwise secure a copy of the relevant text to take to his home church. Alternatively, one church might take the initiative of sending a copy of a text of a gospel or a letter from Paul to another church. The quality of the copy would obviously depend on what an individual scribe hoped to accomplish in making that copy, but verbal exactness does not appear to have been the single most important criterion in copying a manuscript.

We find some hints of the process of disseminating early Christian books in the writings of some early church fathers. For example, 1 Clement, writing in Rome about 95, was obviously referring to a copy of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6) that had been circulated in Rome sometime before 95, when he wrote:

> Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What did he first write to you at the beginning of his preaching? With true inspiration he charged you concerning himself and Cephas and Apollo, because even then you had made yourselves partisans (*1 Clement* 47:1–3).

Likewise, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, alludes to the way in which letters were circulated among Christian churches, when he wrote (ca. 120–140):

> Both you and Ignatius wrote to me that if anyone was going to Syria he should take your letters. I will do this if I have a convenient opportunity, either myself or the man I am sending as a representative for you and me. We send you, as you asked, the letters of Ignatius, which were sent to us by him, and others which we had by us. These are subjoined to this letter, and you will be able to benefit greatly from them. For they contain faith, patience, and all the edification which pertains to our Lord. Let us know anything further which you have heard about Ignatius himself and those who are with him (*The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 13:1–2).

The church at Philippi had apparently written to Polycarp asking him to send them copies of letters of Ignatius that he may have had in Smyrna. This letter served as Polycarp's response to the Philippians' request.

Writing in Rome about 150, Justin Martyr refers several times to "the memoirs of the apostles, which are called Gospels" (*Apology* 66:3; *Dialogue with Trypho* 10:2; 100:1; 101:3; 103:8; 104:1; 105:5; 106:2; 107:1). Justin apparently had access to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and perhaps also to Mark, and composed a harmony

of those two (or three) gospels, indicating once again the instability of the text of the gospels in the second century.[1]

Early Christian scribes almost always made both inadvertent and intentional changes when they copied letters or gospels or any other written material. Conscious changes range from rather innocuous efforts to improve the grammar and the style of the text being copied to significant theological alterations, which were apparently intended to enhance or augment the understanding of Jesus or to advance a particular theological doctrine. It was presumably in this manner that manuscripts of the individual books of the New Testament spread from church to church throughout the ancient Roman world, especially in the earliest decades of the history of Christianity.

It was likely only when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century under the Roman Emperor Constantine that "authorized" copies of the New Testament were generated by professional scribes at the order of the emperor. That conscious decision came, however, more than 250 years after the writing of the autographs of many of the books. In any event, some 5,400 ancient manuscripts of the New Testament survive in their original Greek language, none of them exactly in the form of the autograph drafted by their original authors.

There are, in addition to our almost 5,400 Greek manuscripts, many additional thousands of manuscripts of early translations from the original Greek into other ancient languages—Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Nubian, Persian, Sogdian (a Middle Iranian language), Gothic, Old Church Slavonic, etc. The value of these translations or versions, as they are usually called, for textual criticism is somewhat limited because idiosyncrasies in each of these languages make it difficult for scholars to reconstruct the original Greek text that lay beneath these thousands of ancient versions.

There are also numerous quotations or allusions to New Testament books in the writings of early church fathers. However, alleged citations of the books of the New Testament in the writings of early church fathers raise additional concerns and challenges. Competent scholars disagree as to whether the earliest fathers (i.e. some of the Apostolic Fathers) were familiar with and quoted directly from specific books of the New Testament, quoted books of the New Testament from memory, or had independent access to oral tradition rather than to written books. With respect to citations from the New Testament in some of the later church fathers, we probably learn more about the kind of New Testament manuscript each was using than about the autographs of individual New Testament writings. Furthermore, we have multiple manuscripts of many of the patristic writings, so the process of trying to ascertain the original text of each church father further complicates the question of whether they had independent access to original readings of the text of the New Testament.[2]

1. Bellinzoni, *The Sayings of Jesus*. See also Koester, "Text," 19–37.

2. The names of many of these church fathers are listed in their approximate chronological order with their approximate dates in the Appendix at the end of this chapter.

In addition to Greek manuscripts, ancient translations or versions, and allusions in the writings of church fathers, there are about two thousand two hundred lectionaries or books containing readings for liturgical use during the course of the church's calendar year. Most of these lectionaries are Byzantine in origin, in other words historically relatively late, so unfortunately they afford little to no value in the effort to reconstruct the original text of the New Testament.

However interesting the ancient versions, the allusions in church fathers, and the lectionaries may be for appreciating the ways in which ancient copyists engaged their textual traditions, it is primarily the ancient Greek manuscripts that continue to serve as our primary resource for trying to recreate the original Greek text. Although our almost five thousand four hundred Greek manuscripts are all a bit different, they, nevertheless, provide the raw data from which textual critics have developed both the principles and the methodology required to reconstruct something close to the original Greek text of the canonical New Testament.

It is the assumption of most textual critics that the original reading of the text of the New Testament is, in virtually every instance, present somewhere in this vast storehouse of material with some three hundred thousand variant readings, most of which, fortunately, are very minor. In fact, only a few hundred variants are of important historical or theological significance.

Yet the task can be daunting, and some scholars have raised serious concerns about the possibility of success in this endeavor, especially with regard to the so-called synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In a study of the text of the synoptic gospels in the second century, Helmut Koester observed that:

> All of that evidence . . . points to the fact that the text of the Synoptic Gospels was very unstable during the first and second centuries. . . . With respect to Matthew and Luke, there is no guarantee that the archetypes of the manuscript tradition are identical with the original text of each Gospel. The harmonization of these two Gospels demonstrates that their text was not sacrosanct and that alterations could be expected, even if they were not always as radical as in the case of Marcion's revision of Luke, the *Secret Gospel*'s revision of Mark, and Justin's construction of a harmony.
>
> New Testament textual critics have been deluded by the hypothesis that the archetypes of the textual tradition which were fixed ca. 200 CE—how many archetypes for each gospel?—are (almost) identical with the autographs. This cannot be confirmed by any external evidence. On the contrary, whatever evidence there is indicates that not only minor, but also substantial revisions of the original texts [of the synoptic gospels] have occurred during the first hundred years of their transmission.[3]

To add to Koester's list of radical revisions to the gospels during the earliest decades of their transmission, I have called attention to the fact that scholars who

3. Koester, "Text," 19. See also Koester, *Ancient Gospels*.

subscribe to the priority of the Gospel of Mark could obviously consider the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as radical editorial (i.e., scribal) revisions of the Gospel of Mark.[4]

So too François Bovon:

> Copyists in the second century worked on the text [of Luke] with the best of intents, but thus concealed the original shape of the text. Theologians either tried to purify the work by abridgement (like Marcion) or to harmonize it with other Gospels (like Tatian). . . . The variant readings within the manuscript tradition have various causes: copyists' mistakes, the influence of oral tradition or of the other Gospels (esp. Matthew), recensions, and tendencies in theological development or ecclesiastic sensibilities."[5]

Moreover, William Petersen finds "profoundly flawed" the view that the text of the New Testament was fixed, for the greater part, at an early date in the form known to us today. Petersen asks poignantly: are we

> to presume that in the period when the text was *least* established, the *least* protected by canonical status, and the *most* subject to varying constituencies . . . vying for dominance within Christianity, the text was preserved in virginal purity, magically insulated from all those tawdry motives? To assent to this thesis not only defies common sense, but mocks logic and our experience with the texts of other religious traditions. . . . The text of the documents which would later be included in the New Testament was neither stable nor established.[6]

These comments about the instability of the text in the earliest period of its transmission aim at the very heart of an essential principle or assumption of most New Testament textual critics—namely, that the original reading of the text of the New Testament is present, in virtually every case, somewhere among the almost five thousand four hundred Greek manuscripts. Although this may be the case with many of the books of the New Testament, I contend that we simply cannot make that assumption with respect to the reconstruction of the autograph of the synoptic gospels.

With the exception of a very few papyrus fragments, the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament date to about 200, or more than a century after the autographs of most of the New Testament books were first written, and most of our extant manuscripts come from a time much later than that. In fact, our two earliest most complete manuscripts of the New Testament date from about 350. It may be that we have access not to the autographs of the books of the New Testament, but that, at least in the case of the synoptic gospels, we may have access to texts that were current about 200. Can

4. Bellinzoni, "Gospel of Luke," 47–48, especially n. 8. See also the informative preface to the Gospel of Luke 1:1–4: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the very beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

5. Bovon, *Luke 1*, 1.

6. Peterson, "What the Apostolic Fathers Tell Us," 45–46.

we honestly and realistically expect to close the glaring gap of those critical earlier decades about which we frankly know very little with regard to the transmission of the text of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament?

With that significant reservation in mind, it is important to note that textual criticism of the Bible made significant advances during the nineteenth century. Building upon the pioneering work of Erasmus in the sixteenth century, Karl Lachmann published in Germany in 1831 the first truly critical text of the New Testament, thereby setting aside the so-called *Textus Receptus*, or the Received Text. The *Textus Receptus* was an uncritical, essentially traditional Byzantine text that had served as the "normative" Greek New Testament for several centuries and that served as the basis for the New Testament portion of the King James Bible, published in English in 1611. A second edition of Lachmann's work appeared in 1842–50, together with an extensive critical apparatus and with suggestions on methodology.

With the emergence of textual criticism in the first half of the nineteenth century, with its effort to reconstruct the autograph of the books of the New Testament, German and English scholars began to write commentaries in the second half of the nineteenth century on virtually every book of the Bible, employing a methodology that was critical, linguistic, and historical, rather than a methodology designed to promote religious faith. These commentaries were virtually all written by Christians for Christians to advance Christianity. Most of those scholars assumed rather naïvely that historical study of the Bible would serve to advance rather than to diminish the uniqueness of Christianity.

One of the advances made by text critics was the recognition that manuscripts could be classified by the particular script used by ancient copyists. Scholars observed that the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament generally fall into three principal types: papyri, uncials, and minuscules. The term "papyri" is generally used to refer to papyrus pages that once belonged to codices or bound books but came loose from those books and, therefore, contain only portions of their original texts; papyri date from the second to the eighth centuries. The term "uncials" is generally used to refer to manuscripts written on parchment in uncial (or upper-case) continuous script—i.e. writing with no spacing between words and with no punctuation to mark the ends of sentences; uncials date from the fourth to the tenth century. The term "minuscule" is used of manuscripts written in lower case or cursive script on parchment, and later on paper, of which 80% are of the Majority or Byzantine text type; minuscules date primarily from the eighth to the fifteenth century.

This discovery led to the realization that manuscripts could be also classified into clusters or groups of manuscripts with sufficient similarities to suggest that they belong to a single family. Families of manuscripts apparently originated in the earliest centuries of the spread of Christianity in and around cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, Carthage, Constantinople, Rome, etc. that had especially large and important Christian communities. As additional new churches developed around

these important urban centers, more manuscripts of Christian books were created for those new churches. These new manuscripts would obviously both preserve and amend local readings, thereby creating the families of manuscripts typical of a particular city, locality, or region.

Although textual critics have not always agreed on details of these clusters of manuscripts, these families of manuscripts usually include the following:[7]

1. The Alexandrian Text probably preserves some of the oldest readings of the New Testament. The text of Alexandrian manuscripts is generally shorter than that of other families of manuscripts and shows no significant evidence of the grammatical and stylistic improvements characteristic of most later readings.[8]
2. The Western Text is characterized by a tendency to paraphrase, to omit, to amend, and to add entire sentences, as well as a tendency for harmonization. It circulated particularly in Italy, Gaul, North Africa, and Egypt.[9]
3. A text type previously called the Caesarean Text probably originated in Egypt and may have been spread by Origen to Caesarea, and subsequently to Jerusalem. It is characterized by a conscious tendency to achieve literary excellence.[10]
4. The Byzantine Text is the latest of the families of manuscripts and is set apart by its precision and its completeness.[11] Because of its numerous manuscripts, the Byzantine Text was generally considered the most authoritative text and served as the basis for the printing of the *Textus Receptus*.

In an article on textual criticism, Eldon Jay Epp lays out a series of important criteria for reconstructing the earliest text of the New Testament based on both external and internal evidence.[12] In the following outline, Epp identifies these criteria as particularly significant for recognizing those variants that most likely reflect the autograph or the oldest text of the books of the New Testament:

7. Epp, "Textual Criticism," 431; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, xvii–xxi. New Testament manuscripts are listed according to the following convention: papyri are all listed with a capital P or P and a numerical superscript (e.g. P66 and P45; uncials usually with a capital letter (e.g. ℵ and D), and minuscules generally with numbers (e.g. 1739 and 383).

8. The Alexandrian Text is represented by a line of manuscripts that includes P66, P75, B (Codex Vaticanus), ℵ (Codex Sinaiticus), C (Codex Ephraemi), A (Codex Alexandrinus), L (Codex Regius), 33, 1739; the Sahidic and Boharic Coptic versions from Upper and Lower Egypt respectively; and Alexandrian church fathers from Clement and Origen to Cyril. [The identification of these and other Greek manuscripts as well as manuscripts of the Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Georgian, and Old Church Slavonic versions that are mentioned in this chapter are identified with their approximate dates in the Appendix at the end of this chapter.]

9. The Western Text is represented by P29, P38, P48, 0171, D (Codex Cantabrigiensis), 1739 in the book of Acts, 383, 614; Marcion, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian; and Old Latin versions.

10. The Caesarean Text is represented by P45, W (Codex Washingtonianus), Q (Codex Koridethi); Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem.

11. The Byzantine Text is represented by Codex A (Codex Alexandrinus) in the gospels, and the greatest number of miniscule manuscripts, including P42, P68, P84, and perhaps P74.

12. Epp, "Textual Criticism," 412-35; see 431 for the chart cited here.

A. *Criteria related to external evidence*

1. A variant's support by the earliest manuscripts, or by manuscripts assuredly preserving the earliest texts
2. A variant's support by the "best quality" manuscripts
3. A variant's support by manuscripts with the widest geographical distribution
4. A variant's support by one or more established groups of manuscripts of recognized antiquity, character, and perhaps location, i.e. of recognized "best quality"

B. *Criteria related to internal evidence*

1. A variant's status as the shorter or shortest reading in the variation unit
2. A variant's status as the harder or hardest reading in the variation unit
3. A variant's fitness to account for the origin, development, or presence of all other readings in the variation unit
4. A variant's conformity to the author's style and vocabulary
5. A variant's conformity to the author's theology or ideology
6. A variant's conformity to Koine (rather than Attic) Greek
7. A variant's conformity to Semitic forms of expression
8. A variant's lack of conformity to parallel passages or to extraneous items in the context generally
9. A variant's lack of conformity to Old Testament passages
10. A variant's lack of conformity to liturgical forms and usages
11. A variant's lack of conformity to extrinsic doctrinal views

A succinct summary of these criteria suggests that there are both external and internal criteria for establishing the oldest readings, or possibly even the autograph, of a New Testament book. The external evidence indicates that a textual reading or variant that is found in manuscripts that are the earliest, that are of the best quality, and that reflect the widest geographical distribution have the greatest claim to authenticity, especially if the reading is found in more than one "family" of manuscripts. The internal evidence indicates that a textual reading or variant that is shorter; that is harder (i.e. less orthodox); that can more easily account for other variant readings; that conforms to the author's style, vocabulary, and theology; that is written in Koine Greek; that contains Semitisms; that shows no harmonization to other texts; that lacks conformity to Old Testament parallels; that lacks conformity to liturgical texts; and that shows less predisposition to evolving doctrinal views has a greater claim to authenticity. These

external and internal criteria have been developed and tested by scholars for almost two centuries since Lachmann began the work of Textual Criticism in 1831.

APPLYING THE METHOD TO THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: SOME EXAMPLES

With these criteria in mind and to illustrate the method and the importance of textual criticism, let us proceed to examine six passages in the New Testament with an eye to seeing more clearly how textual critics reconstruct the earliest form of the text and to understanding the specific results in these six instances. In each case, I will compare the best reconstructions with what actually appears in some of our most commonly used Bibles. The following sections might be considered "test cases," as they investigate both specific textual variants and the value of Epp's criteria.

MARK 1:1

> "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."[13]

This first example appears in the openng words of the Gospel of Mark, actually in the title or so-called superscription. In recent translations there is sometimes a footnote to this verse saying something to this effect: Some ancient authorities lack the words "the Son of God." A more accurate footnote would say that most textual critics agree that the words "the Son of God" probably did not appear in the autograph of Mark 1:1 but that they were added by later scribes to enhance the image of Jesus at the very outset of the gospel by advancing or making specific the doctrine of Jesus' divine sonship.

The fact that Jesus is referred to as the Son of God elsewhere in Mark (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:6; 14:61; 15:39) does not necessarily support its presence in Mark 1:1. Likewise, although several early manuscripts have the phrase "the Son of God"[14], "Son of God" is not found in many of the most important manuscript witnesses.[15]

The shorter reading ("The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ") meets several of Epp's criteria as described above: A 1, 2, 3, 4; B 1, 2, 3. The longer reading fails on Epp's criteria. Simply stated, it is much easier to explain why an early scribe might have added the phrase "the Son of God" than it is to explain why an early scribe would have deleted those words. It is also difficult to explain why a scribe would unintentionally miss such an important phrase so early in his transcription of a manuscript, within the first six words of the very beginning of the gospel.

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14. ℵ1, B, D, L, W; 2427; a few latt, sy, co versions; Irenaeuslat, Origenlat, and Augustine.

15. ℵ*, Θ, *l*, 28c, 2211; a few sams, syrp, arm, geo; Origen.