Beyond Unity: Reading Hermeneutic Frictions in Biblical Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation takes up the interpretive challenges posed by the persistent conflicts between biblical narrators (such as those we find in the gospel writers' variant accounts of the resurrection, or in the parallel but divergent royal histories of Israel in the Hebrew Bible). While these conflicts—or "hermeneutic frictions"—seemed a matter of some urgency to the tradition's first interpreters, and then again, in a different way, to higher critical scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they appear to have been largely dismissed by modern literary guides to the Bible or recent theological readings of biblical narrative as a subject for historical rather than literary study. The dissertation aims, first, to clarify how a persistent element of biblical literature—the hermeneutic frictions between multiple accounts of the same event, character or history—became marginalized in both literary and theological readings of the Bible; and second, to offer an alternative proposal, exploring how these frictions might be revisited as constitutive elements of the Bible's literary form, and thereby promising sites for both literary and theological reflection.

The first part of the dissertation considers the history behind this division of interpretive labors. It begins by looking at the work of German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen who popularized higher critical study by lending literary and theological significance to the frictions and fissures these scholars identified in the Biblical canon, using the divergences between source texts as a way to distinguish between more and less reliable narrators and therefore more and less authentic biblical texts. It then considers the rise of literary guides to the Bible and theological approaches to biblical narrative in higher criticism's wake, demonstrating how these texts utilized a largely defensive approach to literary reading in order to reclaim the higher unities of the Biblical canon and reframe its authority on aesthetic rather than historical grounds. Rather than simply rejecting the interpretive prejudices or hermeneutic suspicions of higher critical scholars and developing their own approach to the conflicts between biblical narrators, literary and theological readers yielded these textual elements entirely, advancing a vision of the text's coherence and internal integrity and thereby exiling the hermeneutic friction between the Bible's narrators from the realms of both literary and theological inquiry.

The second part of the dissertation lays out an alternative proposal, considering how the friction between biblical narrators might be understood as a productive site for literary and theological meaning. After tracing the way in which the "narrative turn" in Christian theology came to sideline hermeneutic frictions in the name of the larger coherence of the biblical story, the project

turns to an unlikely resource for interpreting the work of textual frictions by examining two novels contemporary with the rise of higher criticism: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In these texts, conflicts between narrators or variant angles of vision are not simply exceptions to an underlying narrative coherence but rather, form a key aspect of the text's literary meaning as the novels use these frictions to explore the nature of human perception, and the production of knowledge. Finally, the dissertation returns to Biblical texts, exploring the constructive possibilities for literary and theological reflection held open by the Bible's internal hermeneutic frictions.

Chapter One | *Hermeneutic Friction and the Two Literary Criticisms*

The critical study of the composition of the Pentateuch begins, in practical terms, and began, in terms of the history of scholarship, with the attempt to read the Pentateuchal narrative from beginning to end as a unified whole. The nearly immediate consequence of such an attempt is and was the recognition that the canonical text, when read as a human literary product rather than a divinely inspired work, presents insurmountable literary problems.[1]

JOEL S. BADEN

The so-called redacted text—which has come down to us, though not without certain limited contradictions and disparate elements, has powerful coherence as a literary work…this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers.[2]

ROBERT ALTER

[1] Joel Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (Yale Anchor Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 13.
[2] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), xlii.
[3] See Janice Capel Anderson, "Source, Form, Redaction and Literary Criticism of the Bible," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From 150 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 149-159.

I. Two Literary Criticisms

It is an oft-repeated commonplace in contemporary biblical scholarship that classical "literary criticism" (*literarkritik*) of the Bible was not truly "literary" at all.[3] Instead, the rise of what were first called "literary" approaches to the Bible in the mid-nineteenth century (a movement now identified as higher or historical criticism[4]) is narrated by contemporary histories of scholarship as a turn away from the concrete features of biblical narrative[5] toward theoretical suppositions about their historical veracity and the antecedent realities behind Biblical authorship and redaction.[6] Questions about contradictions and incongruencies within and between the books of the canon—such as those posed by source critical scholars of the Pentateuch or those who investigate the tensions between the gospel narratives—are represented as a scholarly investment in history, not literature. These questions, as well as the textual data that underlies them, are seen as extraneous, irrelevant or even inimical to the proper 'literary' meaning of these texts.

There is a degree of truth to this common synopsis.[7] Higher critics did, in fact, make their mark on biblical studies by developing analytic tools that enabled them to consider the "anterior realities" of Biblical composition and redaction behind these texts' self-representation. But these critical tools were rarely engineered from a posture of broad historical speculation[8] (nor the

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[3] See Janice Capel Anderson, "Source, Form, Redaction and Literary Criticism of the Bible," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 4, From 1750 to the Present* ed. John Riches (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 149-159.

[4] Each of these terms has a long and contested history, as well as long and contestable corresponding definitions. The term "higher criticism" originated in the eighteenth century in relationship to "lower criticism." While "lower criticism" concerned itself with textual variants and alternative manuscript traditions, "higher criticism" built upon this foundation, studying the form of the text as we have best established it, and asking subsequent questions about literary style, authenticity and coherence. "Historical criticism," on the other hand, is now the more common term of art—distinguishing the form of a particular set of text critical disciplines (source criticism, redaction criticism, and form criticism, to name a few) from "literary" interests in the Bible. In this dissertation, I will principally focus on the branches of higher critical analysis that deal with seeming contradiction or incoherence between divergent representations of singular objects (mostly source or synoptic criticism), though this more focused study of one branch of biblical criticism might certainly have implications for other text critical disciplines, as well.

[5] See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[6] For further reading on the prevalence of this approach to higher criticism, see John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology*: *Collected Essays of John Barton*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007).

[7] The extent to which this division of labor holds is informed in large part by the rise of modern literary approaches to the Bible and the retreat of source critics in particular to the realm of purely "historical" considerations. See Joel S. Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009): 209-224.

[8] There are, of course, a subset of disciplines associated with the higher critical enterprise that are principally invested in the historical veracity of events like the Exodus, or of the description of the life and works of Jesus as provided in the gospel narratives. This dissertation, however, is decidedly less interested in work of this kind that takes up historical questions as its primary frame. Instead, I focus on work that operates within a literary frame, asking questions that emerge from tensions between various books or within the same narrative, though that is not to say that historical approaches to biblical text have no apparent merit for literary investigation, which would be to reify a divide that this dissertation aims to critique.

theological skepticism with which they are so often associated).[9] More often than not, these modes of textual inquiry were developed in order to address the significant *literary* problems[10] these critics encountered in their attempts to read and interpret scripture—problems that posed serious difficulties to any straightforward reading of these texts.[11]

The literary problems higher critics identified in the Bible were not simply shifts in diction (between the way a given narrative names God, for example, which might easily be explained as a matter of stylistic variation).[12] Instead, higher critics drew readers' attention to significant plot discrepancies between the ways that multiple biblical authors or "sources" narrate the same event. They pointed to the discrepancies between gospel writers' varied depictions of the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection: who saw the risen Messiah first, what they saw, and what these witnesses did afterwards. Higher critics also highlighted similar tensions between the royal histories we find in the books of Samuel and Kings and the alternative, often whitewashed versions of these histories we find in the book of Chronicles (which tends to "remember with advantages"[13] the more troubling aspects of Israel's past).[14] Tensions like these, between the varied testimony of various biblical narrators, posed significant challenges to the interpretation of the Bible as a literary whole.

Higher critics identified literary problems not only in the disparities between variously authored books of the Bible, but also within the plot of individual narratives. In their engagement with the story of Noah and the great flood, for example, higher critics raised questions about the

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[9] Michael C. Legaspi and Jonathan Sheehan have both persuasively argued that attempts to understand pre-modern and modern biblical criticism within a broad secularization thesis tend to distort rather than clarify the motivation of the biblical scholars of these periods. Against scholars like Hans Frei, they argue that biblical scholarship during this period stood *against* the Deists as a means of preserving the ongoing cultural authority of the Bible in a way that might enable it, in Sheehan's words, to "compete with the grinding effects of skepticism" (Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010]; Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*: *Translation, Scholarship, Culture* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005], xi).

[10] By literary problems, I simply mean anything in the text that precludes a straightforward reading of the plot, or introduces a tension that calls for further explanation.

[11] Baden writes, "The Documentary Hypothesis is a purely literary solution to a purely literary problem. The inherent difficulties in reading the canonical text of the Pentateuch—the contradictions of detail in both narrative and law, the violations in one passage of the historical claims made in another, the repetitions and variations of events—demand an explanation" (Joel S. Baden, *J, E and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 2).

[12] See Pauline A. Viviano, "Source Criticism" in *To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application* ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 48-53. It is important to note that certain stylistic variations did play an important role in the earliest generations of higher critical investigation of the Bible as scholars tried to mark out the distinctive literary style and features of what appeared to be internally coherent literary bodies in order to distinguish between sources within the wider canon.

[13] The phrase "remember with advantages" is an old Shakespearean adage, taken from the St. Crispins Day speech given by Henry V in William Shakespeare's play by the same name. "Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,/But he'll remember with advantages/What feats he did that day." I am indebted to Joe Lenow for this reference.

[14] See Ashleigh Elser, "Remembering with Advantages: Chronicles and the Hermeneutics of Revision and Redaction," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 9 (2016).

two contradictory sets of instructions God gives Noah about the kinds and quantities of animals he is required to take with him on the ark.[15] How should a reader sort out these disparate instructions, or determine the basic timeline of this narrative when the flood is, at times, described as lasting forty days while in other places in the text the waters prevail upon the earth for a total of one-hundred and fifty days?[16] How should this reader account for the fact that the mysterious flood waters appear to come both from the ground and from the heavens?[17] Or further, how might she adjudicate between the two different times that Noah and his family appear to enter the ark: once before the flood, and once after it has begun? How should she make sense of the fact that the Lord appears to shut the door of the ark long after the floodgates burst open?[18] Narrative tensions such as those found in the story of Noah were identified in large numbers across the first five books of the Bible (what Jewish readers call the "Torah" and Christian readers call the "Pentateuch"). Higher critics came to call the visible points of tension between disparate narrations "seams"—inner-textual clues that divergent materials had at some point been sewn together.[19]

While they were not the first to identify or interpret frictions and fissures in biblical narrative, higher critics were the first to develop hermeneutic methods designed not to resolve or harmonize these tensions, but instead to take them as incitement to "unscramble the omelette"[20] and parse out the individual constituent pieces behind putative literary wholes.[21] While this methodological shift in Biblical studies is often interpreted as a consequence of the rise of a certain historicist sensibility in German universities in the early nineteenth century,[22] it also bears significant debts to antecedent scholarly campaigns in the eighteenth century that worked to reframe biblical texts as works of human genius and enduring cultural value. In this second light, higher critics'

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[15] Genesis 6:19-20, 7:2-3.
[16] Genesis 7:17, 24.
[17] Genesis 7:11.
[18] Genesis 6:7, 13; 16.
[19] Baden provides a helpful definition of seams as "those literary loci at which one source changes to another, or a secondary insertion is found" (Joel S. Baden, "A Narrative Pattern and Its Role in Source Criticism," *Hebrew Studies* 49 [2008]: 41-54, 41).
[20] This is an old and oft-quoted dig at higher critical biblical scholarship, used many times in different places by a British social anthropologist named Edmund Leach, who insisted that this move to separate out the original parts from the final form was in any case unlikely to improve the omelette's taste (Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 3).
[21] "Among the first" is an important qualification here. As early as the twelfth century, a medieval scholar by the name of Ibn Ezra begins to note passages in the Torah that seem like explanatory asides to a future generation, asides like "the Canaanites were then in the land" that must have been written when this was no longer true, and therefore, Ibn Ezra reasons, could not have been written by Moses. See John Collins, "The Nature of the Pentateuchal Narrative" in *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 50.
[22] See Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burkhardt and the Theological Origins and Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

attempts to make sense of the Bible's literary problems by distinguishing between the voices of various interlocking narrators can be reinterpreted as a consequence not of pure historical interests, but of an earlier stage in what came to be known as the Bible as Literature movement, as eighteenth-century scholars attempted to reclaim and refortify the Bible's forfeited cultural powers by recasting its contents as a species of high literature.

II. The Bible as a Literary Text

In the wake of the Bible's fall from the position of broad social and religious authority it occupied in the centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation,[23] scholars in diverse fields worked to revive the power of the Biblical canon by making a case for this text to be recognized for its enduring cultural significance.[24] As Jonathan Sheehan argues, the institutionalization of biblical studies within the modern university was not a sign of the bible's cultural defeat at the hands of secularist forces. Rather, the myriad translation projects and intensive philological, historical, and literary study of the Bible within German and English universities represented a scholarly attempt to reconstitute the Bible's power on new terms for a new generation of biblical readers.

This wider shift in the academic study of the Bible is most important in the interests of this project in terms of the development of scholarly interest in the literary reading and appreciation of these texts. German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803)—a colleague and major influence on Johann Gottfried Eichorn, one of the founding thinkers of the higher critical movement[25]—claimed that the words of the Bible ought to be revered not simply with respect to their dogmatic value but for their aesthetic powers and literary prowess.[26] In Herder's estimation, these texts provide rich access to the particular spirit of distinct historical peoples, and at the same time portray universal depths of human feeling. They ought, therefore, to be approached with all the tools and

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[23] For more on this significant transition in the cultural position occupied by the Bible in this period, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies,* 10.

[24] These efforts were particularly relevant to the work of retaining the value of the Old Testament. While efforts to reinvigorate the moral or pedagogical virtues of the Bible were directed almost exclusively to the teachings of the New Testament—it was more difficult to dispel the foggy "air of antiquity" that hovered over the first half of the canon. Literary appreciation and in particular the recognition of the "sublime" in the narratives and poetry of the Old Testament was key in dispelling this fog. (Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible* 151, 178).

[25] See Ian Balfour, "Herder and Eichhorn: Word, Deed, and Fiction in Prophetic Discourse," in *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 106-126.

[26] Of course, literary appreciation of the Bible was not novel in the eighteenth century. As far back as the Patristic period, writers had praised the eloquence and style of the Bible, acclaiming its aesthetic merit over and against the secular literary tradition of their time.

energies we would lend any work of human genius. Herder explains:

> One must read the Bible in a human way: for it is a book written by human beings for human beings: human is the lanugage, human are the outer means with which it was preserved; human, in the end, is indeed the sense with which it can be grasped, every means that serves its interpretation, as well as the entire purpose and use to which it is supposed to be put.[27]

Herder encouraged his readers to engage Biblical texts as inspired wonders, but wonders of a distinctly human literary production. By recognizing the form of these texts' speech as literary craft—a poetics Herder elsewhere calls "divine language"[28]—a reader can more meaningfully attend to the image of God that scripture materially supplies. This reader can witness the human writer imitating the divine work of creation by becoming a true *ποιητής*—"a second creator".[29]

Herder is one influential figure within a wider scholarly movement that advocated for the appreciation of Bible as a literary object.[30] This turn was conceived by its proponents as part of a larger and more diverse effort to substantiate the Bible's authority in an age when its former claims to cultural power had expired. But this attempt to read the Bible as a species of literary genius and to

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[27] Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Erster Brief" in *Sämmtliche Werke: zur Religion und Theologie.* (Stuttgart and Tubingen: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung 1827-30), 7; quoted and translated by Christoph Bultmann, "Herder's Biblical Studies," in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder,* ed. Hans Adler, Wulf Kopke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 237. "Menschlich muß man die Bibel lessen: denn sie ist ein Buch durch Menschen für Menschen geschrieben: menschlich ist die Sprache, menschlich die außern Hülfsmittel, mit denen sie geschrieben und aufbehalten ist; menschlich endlich ist ja der Sinn, mit dem sie gefaßt werden kann, jedes Hülfsmittel, das sie erläutert, so wie der ganze Zweck und Nutzen, zu dem sie angewendet werden soll."

[28] Elsewhere, Herder writes, "It was God who created the fountain of feeling in man, who placed the universe with all its numberless currents setting in upon him and mingled them with the feelings of his own breast. He gave him also language and the powers of poetical invention, and thus far is the origin of poetry divine. It is human in respect to the measure and peculiarity of this feeling, and of the expression which is given to it; for only human organs feel and utter the emotions and conceptions of the poet. Poetry is a divine language, yet not in the sense that we understand by it what the Divine Being in himself feels and utters: whatever was given to the most godlike men, even through a higher influence, to feel and experience in themselves, was still human" (Herder, *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* Vol. 1, trans. James Marsh [Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833], 6)

[29] Adam is Herder's exemplar of the creative use of language as the imitation of God. When he describes Adam's naming of all creatures in the opening chapters of Genesis, he writes, "In giving names to all, and ordering all from the impulse of his own inward feeling, and with reference to himself, he (Adam) becomes an imitator of the Divinity, a second creator…a creative poet. Following this origin of the poetic art, instead of placing its essence in an imitation of nature, as has generally been done, we might still more boldly place it in an imitation of that divine agency which creates and gives form and determinateness to the objects of its creation" (Herder, *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* Vol. 1, 7-8).

[30] Obviously many others could be named. Prominent among those names would be Bishop Robert Lowth, one of the early proponents of literary engagement with the Bible. In his popular lectures on Hebrew poetry, Lowth argued that readers of the Bible should turn to scholars of poetry for edification, to see not only *that* Biblical verse inspires, but to study *how* it does this—to learn the literary strategies employed by these writers to produce "sacred poetry". In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, Lowth writes, "whoever has a clear insight into the instruments, the machinery as it were, by which this end is affected, will certainly contribute not a little to the improvement of the critical art" (Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory F.A.S., [Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1829], 26).

engage it with a corresponding form of scholarly attention—to follow Benjamin Jowett's famed charge to "interpret the scripture like any other book"—had ramifications that its early proponents could not have predicted.[31] Close attention to the scriptures as works of human genius and objects of literary study illuminated serious interpretive issues in the text that presented no small obstacle to literary reading.

Under the influence of biblical scholars like Herder, higher critics saw the appearance of apparent contradictions in Biblical literature as cause not to work out the mysterious unities of a singular divine intention, but to parse out the authorial intention of several different human authors, and to give these distinct intentions their own voices and integrities.[32] Rather than seeing conflicts between these distinct voices as anomalies within an otherwise functional and preferable hermeneutic frame, higher critics attempted to interpret these difficulties as textual elements in their own right.[33] The theories that emerged from this mode of inquiry into the history of the Bible's composition came as a result of studied attempts to make sense of the friction between seemingly disparate authorial intentions and to take these frictions as revelatory (though certainly not in a traditional sense).

It was not speculative historical suppositions then, but serious problems in the narrative coherency of these texts (such as those catalogued above) that led scholars who were at that time called "literary critics" of the Bible to sketch out theories of textual composition and modes of literary analysis that more accurately reflected the convoluted quality of the narratives they took as their object of study. The work of higher critics to discern the presence of serious discrepancies between basic points of plot in the literary compositions before them and to move from the friction between two contrasting narrations to an exploration of the graduated process of Biblical

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[31] Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture" in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 377. We find a similar sentiment expressed in the earlier work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in one of his *Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures* (later called *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*) as he writes, "I take up [the Bible] with the purpose to read it for the first time as I should any other work—as far at least as I can or dare" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Letter I," *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Vol. 5 [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854], 579)

[32] We might understand the difference between these two approaches to textual difficulties in light of Higher Criticism's departure from what Michel Foucault called the "author function" in hermeneutic investigation. Foucault defines the author as "the principle of a certain unity of writing," clarifying, "all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be…a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction" (Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon, 1984], 111-119).

[33] The argument could certainly be made that a figure like Origen of Alexandria stands as a precursor to this interpretive impulse—to take the frictions as "meaningful" in and of themselves (though for Origen these friction bear theological rather than historical meaning).

composition and redaction was thus not an end in and of itself for these scholars,[34] nor a perceived "end" to the status of Christian faith, but "a literary solution to a literary problem, and no more than that."[35]

III. Historical Reading and Literary Reading

Why then the ongoing attempt over the last century at the hands of members of the modern "Bible as Literature" school[36] to make facile distinctions between the disciplines that were first called literary criticism of the Bible and the literary approaches that followed them?[37] What motivated these second-wave literary critics of the Bible to differentiate themselves in strong, polemical terms from their predecessors, claiming that the methods of these earlier so-called "literary" critics actually stand at odds with an investment in the literary meaning or significance of these texts? Why might scholars like Robert Alter and Frank Kermode argue, as they do in their introduction to *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, that this mode of criticism they almost always refer to as "historical" poses more a threat than an aid to literary readings of the Bible, claiming that while this approach may have been a matter of "great cultural and doctrinal importance…it diverted attention from biblical narrative, poetry and prophecy as *literature*, treating them instead as more or less distorted historical records"?[38]

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[34] This common suggestion is perhaps best illustrated by a comment made by Northrop Frye, who writes, "textual scholarship has never really developed the "higher" criticism that made such noise in the nineteenth century. Instead of emerging from lower criticism, or textual study, most of it dug itself into a still lower, or sub-basement, criticism in which disintegrating the text became an end in itself. As a result its essential discoveries were made quite early, and were followed by a good deal of straw-thrashing" (Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*: *The Bible and Literature* [San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1981], xvii).

[35] Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 249. Ernest Nicholson makes a similar argument in *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century,* though he claims that this investigation into the composition of scripture had historical investments its ultimate end, and I think these investments are harder to extricate from Wellhausen's literary interests. (Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002]).

[36] The "Bible as Literature" school tends to be identified with the rise of a literary approach to the Bible (or those portions of the Bible deemed "literary") in the 1980s—specifically the work of Robert Alter, Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye, Gabriel Josipovici and Stephen Prickett among others. See David L. Jeffrey, "The Bible as Literature in the 1980s: A Guide for the Perplexed," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 59 (1990): 569-580.

[37] See, for example, the preface to Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman's *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, in which they clarify the forms of reading that do not count as a contribution to the study of the Bible as literature: "Literary approaches to the Bible are characterized partly by what they do *not* take up, and this is true of our book as well. We asked contributors to avoid issues of the historicity of events, theories of authorship and background material," and then later "the essays in this book assume the unity of Biblical books and are uninterested in how the text came to its present form" (Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 11, 19).

[38] Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, "General Introduction" to *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987). It should be noted that Robert Alter modifies his position on source-criticism, and in the Preface to the Revised Edition to *The Art of Biblical Narrative* claims that "even in the polemic zeal of *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* I made clear that these were indispensible tools for dealing with ancient texts." Alter credits his

"It is common nowadays," biblical scholar John Barton explains, "to contrast historical with literary criticism and to regard the former as markedly 'unliterary' in character, but this is because 'literary' criticism nowadays is notably unhistorical."[39] The decidedly "unhistorical" quality of this latter discipline that wrested the term "literary" from their more historically oriented predecessors is no accident. In fact, this latter wave of literary approaches to the Bible[40] owe a significant portion of their prominence in the twentieth century to their ability to figure their own modes of synchronic reading as the valiant opposition to the strictly "historical" investments of the higher critical paradigm.[41]

You can find the "scholarly deliver" allegory that Barton alludes to above in the prefaces to modern "Bible as Literature" volumes.[42] In these lengthy preambles, the virtues of literary attention and moreover, literary appreciation, are pitted against the ravages of "modern biblical scholarship."[43] Inveighing against the reductive tendency of their predecessors to see in each and every diverse narration cause for suspicion toward biblical authors or the integrity of individual literary units, these

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colleague Ronald Hendel with helping him to go through *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and make emendations to the work in order to temper his rhetoric toward source critical scholarship. (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*: *Revised and Updated* [New York: Basic Books, 2011], x-xi).

[39] John Barton, "Historical-Critical Approaches" in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14. Barton adds, "it is in the sophistication of their literary analysis that most so-called 'historical' critics excelled. When they turned to write history in the normal sense of the term their efforts were usually far less sophisticated, being often guided by theological assumptions or even by a tendency to paraphrase the biblical text."

[40] While most scholars identify the Bible as Literature movement as a more recent phenomenon, gaining particular momentum over the last several decades, by "latter wave" here, I mean to refer to a much longer strand of literary readings of the Bible—beginning in the late nineteenth century—that frame their scholarship as clearly distinct from or even antagonistic to the form of reading espoused by higher critical scholars of the Bible.

[41] Meir Sternberg echoes Barton's words about the "antihistorical bias" of these latter literary readers of scripture in another key, explaining: "their dismissal of historicism makes an ideological rather than a methodological reorientation" and arguing that "polemics may at best clear the ground but not substitute for a scholarly alternative. At times, indeed, the emphasis laid on the classroom and immediate enjoyment, with the occasional hint that neither requires even a knowledge of Hebrew, gives the impression that the object is rather to save the Bible from the hands of the scholars" (Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 8).

[42] See, for example, "Introduction to the Old Testament," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987), 25-26; Richard G. Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha*, *Presented in Modern Literary Form* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1895); Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1981). James Kugel argues that while modern "literary critics" of the Bible lament the distortions of higher critical scholarship, they indeed do much damage and distortion of their own in their attempts to comprehend the Bible's form in terms of modern categories of literature, genre and style. (See James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," in *Prooftexts* 1 [1981]: 217-236).

[43] For more on this "deliverer" allegory, see James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 11 (1981): 217-236. It should be noted that several of these authors—Robert Alter prominently among them—make more space for higher critical modes of reading in the body of their text than they seem to in their introductions, even if their engagements continue to operate defensively, proving that literary unities can still be upheld, even if we understand them in terms of the work of a artful redactor. (See Robert Alter, "Composite Artistry" in *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 163-192).

prefaces paint higher criticism as a "nervous hovering" over the text—a frantic and constant rearrangement of imagined puzzle pieces that ultimately renders impossible the appreciation of literary wholes.[44] Against the destructive capacity of these hermeneutics of suspicion, modern literary readers introduce their own form of "reverent reading"[45] as the blessed and necessary alternative.[46]

Of course, critiques of the reductive tendencies of higher critical approaches to the Bible are not without merit. One does not have to read far into the seventeenth century Catholic priest Richard Simon's foundational *Histoire Critique de Vieux Testament*, for example, to see an example of how higher critical scholars could be perceived as needlessly prejudiced and tone-deaf readers—particularly with respect to the literary integrity of biblical texts.[47] Early in Simon's commentary, he argues that the corruption and fallibility of scripture can be clearly witnessed by attending to the literary problems that emerge in the contradiction between the writer of Genesis' narration of a foreign king falling in love with Abraham's wife, Sarah, and the narrator's earlier description of Sarah as "well stricken in years." Simon writes,

> We ought methinks much rather to lay this fault concerning the method of things upon the disposition of the ancient scrolls which in this and many other places has been chang'd, than to fly to a miracle and to suppose, as some authors do, that God by a particular providence had restored to Sarah the beauty of her youth.[48]

Simon's dogged resistance to the possibility that Sarah's beauty or desirability could have persisted in

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[44] In another essay, Robert Alter writes that higher criticism "from so much overfocused concentration on the seams, has drawn attention away from the design of the whole…the goal is to lead us toward what the biblical authors and author-redactors surely aimed for—a continuous *reading* of the text instead of a nervous hovering over its various small components" (Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987], 25-26).

[45] For more on how literary approaches to the Bible serve as subtle defenders of religious orthodoxy (particularly within modern Judaism) see Mara H. Benjamin, "The Tacit Agenda of a Literary Approach to the Bible," *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 254-274.

[46] The more conservative members of this school go so far as to yield not only literary tension, but the very question of the text's genre—whether it is a representation of historical fact or a literary construction—to historical scholars, claiming that this question is of no interest to the literary reader. Leland Ryken, for example, argues that "the question of fictionality in the Bible belongs to historical scholarship, not literary criticism." While Ryken means to remove an obstacle for religious readers toward the acceptance of a literary approach to the Bible (the idea that literary readings are premised on the fictional character of the text), he takes a question off the table—the matter of a text's genre—that is of substantive interest for literary interpretation. (Leland Ryken, " 'Words of Delight': The Bible as Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 [1990], 7).

[47]Richard Simon, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (Paris, 1680). Simon was a French Catholic priest and is considered to be among the more prominent forerunners to higher-critical scholarship—particularly in his attention to textual variants and critiques of conventional accounts of biblical authorship. For more on Simon and his influence on later critics, see John van Seters, "The History of the 'Editor' in Biblical Criticism from Simon to Wellhausen" in *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the 'Editor" in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbraums, 2006), 185-243.

[48] Richard Simon, *A Critical History of the Old Testament,* (London: Walter Davis, 1682), vi-vii.

her old age clarifies how higher critical scholars came to be perceived by later biblical readers as operating not only with a crude sense of the literary but also a "crude idea of historicity"[49]—finding unreliable narrators wherever the text betrayed their sense of convention,[50] and building cases for suspicion about the composition of these texts on a set of predictable prejudices.[51]

But rather than simply rejecting the prejudice of their forebears and the damaging effects of higher critical hermeneutics of suspicion, modern literary readers spurned instead the literary significance of the incongruencies themselves.[52] Declaiming both the frequency[53] of these frictions as well as their wider significance for literary or theological reflection, these later literary readers threw the proverbial baby out with the bath water, posing narrative "unity"[54] and an interpretive framework guided by the "final form"[55] of that text as the *only* way to fully appreciate the Bible as literature.[56] Narrative theologians later expanded this commitment in their consideration of the

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[49] William McKane, "Richard Simon" in *Selected Christian Hebraists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 115.
[50] Robert Alter writes, "I am deeply convinced that conventional biblical scholarship has been trigger-happy in using the arsenal of text-critical categories, proclaiming contradiction wherever there is the slightest internal tension in the text, seeing every repetition as evidence of a duplication of sources, everywhere tuning in to the static of transmission, not to the complex music of the redacted story" (Alter, *Genesis,* xliii).
[51] The most prominent set of prejudices associated with higher criticism of the Hebrew Bible are, of course, those directed against Judaism. In an address given at the Judean Banquet in 1903, Solomon Schechter—the then President of Jewish Theological Seminary—addressed the dangers of this mode of biblical scholarship he famously called "Higher Anti-Semitism" (Solomon Schecter, "Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism" in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* [Cincinnati: Ark Publishing, 1915], 39).
[52] The higher critical method is rarely rejected altogether by second-wave literary readers of the Bible, but rather "set aside" as irrelevant to the attempt to engage the Bible as a literary text. For example, in a recent essay on the Jacob cycle, Robert Alter engages briefly with source critical reading of the story in order to conclude that "the composite character of the text…poses less difficulty than one might imagine." That is, again, to frame higher criticism as mainly a potential obstacle that literary readings must show themselves capable of overcoming (Robert Alter, "Literature" in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods* ed. Ronald Hendel [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 26).
[53] Alter writes, "my own experience as a reader makes me suspect that such insoluble cruxes deriving from the composite nature of the text are somewhat rarer than scholars tend to assume" (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Literature*, 166).
[54] The first wave of reactive Bible as Literature scholarship in the early nineteenth century tended to paint the Bible's unity in broad brushstrokes—appealing to wide concepts of "Biblical style" (though we also see this later in writers like Erich Auerbach). In more recent decades, the appeal for unity tends to be restricted to the independent literary unit—what James Muilenbug calls "an indissoluble whole, an artistic and creative unity, a unique formulation"-- though it clearly still retains a defensive function. (James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 [1969]: 9.)
[55] "Final form" is a term of art associated with an approach to Biblical literature called "canonical criticism" popularized by the work of Brevard Childs. The term "Final form" constitutes an apologetic appeal against higher critical modes of interpretation to approach the text not as a compilation of source documents but as a *canon*—that is, to consider it in the finalized form in which it has been received. Though this term derives from a theological approach to scriptural interpretation, the concept is taken up in subtle ways by later literary readers of scripture in their apologetics against the "excative" work of higher critical scholarship, and in their appeal to attend simply to the words on the page (as if this precluded attention to apparent frictions on the page). See Brevard Childs, "Canon and Criticism" in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979), 69-83; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 14.
[56] Earlier instantiations of the Bible as Literature school tend to speak broadly about a unified style across Biblical literature. As, for example, Richard Moulton argues, "no principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole." Later voices in this camp, however, make fuller admissions about the

literary and theological unity of the canon and its corresponding interpretive traditions. The frictive or incongruous character of Biblical narratives or of the wider canon as a whole[57] was thereby determined to be an object of historical rather than literary interest, and a matter of feeble significance in interpreting the real literary (as well as theological) meaning of these texts. In this way, second-wave literary readers erected a wall between historical and literary investments in the Bible, effectively compartmentalizing these two approaches to interpretation.[58] Issues with the coherency or congruity of Biblical texts were located firmly in the camp of historical interest, opposite a commitment to artistic intention (whether human or divine)[59] and an aesthetics driven by literary unity.[60]

That is not to say, however, that modern literary readers reject all evidence of the Bible's convoluted composition process, nor to imply that they are uniformly hostile toward higher critical approaches to biblical literature.[61] In the amended introduction to *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* for example, Robert Alter argues that higher critical scholarship is an "indispensable" tool for scholarly engagement with the Bible.[62] In one of the final chapters of this book, Alter goes so far as to explicitly address the challenge that the convoluted quality of biblical composition presents to those who wish to apply literary methodologies to the study of Biblical texts. There Alter argues that

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diversity of the canon, though they tend to refer to this diversity almost exclusively in terms of the relations between books within that canon rather than a more basic diversity between perspectives in a single biblical narrative (Richard Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha Presented in Modern Literary Form* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895], 1718; Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987], 12-16).

[57] Chaya Halberstam persuasively argues that the modern Bible as Literature movement has often marginalized or failed to address large portions of the text that fall outside their category for what counts as "literary"—most notably, the extensive legal material we find, particularly in the Pentateuch. See Chaya Halberstam, "The Art of Biblical Law" *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 345-64.

[58] Biblical scholar Iain Provan compares the division in contemporary biblical scholarship between "story" and "history" to the ancient practice of tying a prisoner by the arms and legs to two separate horses, and then sending the two horses out to gallop—sentencing said prisoner (and by way of metaphor, said text) to a violent, fractured fate. (Iain Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 [1995]: 585-606).

[59] For more on the tendency of modern Bible as Literature scholars to see their literary reading of text as revelatory not only of interpretive meaning but compositional intention, see Adele Berlin, "Literary Exegesis" in *"Not in Heaven": Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* ed. Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 120-128.

[60] Again, most modern literary readers of the Bible tend to allow diversity, or to admit historical evidence of layers within Pentateuchal texts, but their literary analysis of this text seems consistently aimed at the fact that this diversity does not affect our reading of these texts as formal unities. See for example Robert Alter's treatment of source criticism in his brief essay "Literature" in *Reading Genesis.* (Alter, *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods,* 13-27).

[61] Indeed, there are scholars of biblical literature outside of the canon of "literary guides" who are sensitive to both questions of the text's composition and its literary structure. See, for example, Carolyn J. Sharp, Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[62] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, x.

higher critical scholarship provides a cautionary reminder to modern readers that "the composite texts of the Bible sometimes confront us with discontinuities, duplications, and contradictions that cannot be so readily accommodated to our own assumptions about literary unity."[63]

However, even in the exceptional moments when modern literary readers laud higher critical contributions to biblical studies, the merits of these contributions tend to be construed in narrow terms and distinguished from the material work of "literary" reading. In Alter's commentary on the book of Genesis, for example, he claims as his operative assumption that the "so-called redacted text…has powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers."[64] Higher critical scholarship may be in some sense "indispensable" to the larger project of biblical interpretation, but it appears largely irrelevant to questions about the literary meaning of these texts—questions built on the assumption of the ultimate "coherence" of the literary object.[65] On these terms, the proper aim of literary readings of the Bible is often framed as attention to the "final stage in the process of artistic creation that produced biblical narrative,"[66] the "composite artistry" of the redactor.[67] If higher criticism serves a function for the literary reader, it is in its limited capacity for clarification, reminding literary readers that their modern interpretive categories may not always fit ancient literary works.

This circumscribed view of the role of higher criticism within literary interpretation of the Bible is not unrelated to the way that Christian theologians similarly came to marginalize the relevance of higher critical inquiry in their interpretation of scriptural texts[68]— upholding "unity" and "congruence" as the central constitutive features of biblical literature, despite extensive textual

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[63] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 164.

[64] Alter, *Genesis*, xxx. Alter does adjust his position on the validity of higher criticism as an interpretive tool in later years, making adjustments to his "Composite Artistry" chapter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* that reflect his new understanding of the prevalence of divisions between sources, but he still focuses on the "artistry" of the "final form" of the text as the primary locus of literary meaning.

[65] Again, Alter conceives of the literary object in terms of discrete literary units, which is a significant turn from the move in earlier stages of the Bible as Literature to make a case for the unity of the Bible's poetic or prosaic style as a whole.

[66] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 165. R.N. Whybray makes a case that while Alter's dogged commitment to limiting literary engagements with the Bible to discussions of its final form may respect the artistic creation of one generation of authors, it patently dismisses the many generations of artists that stand behind this frictive creation. (Whybray, "On Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 [1983]: 75-96).

[67] For further discussion on Alter's "mono-authorism" and its relationship to long strands of religiously motivated hermeneutic conservatism, see Jacques Berlinerblau, "The Bible as Literature" *Hebrew Studies* 45 (2004): 9-26. Among his insights, Berlinerbrau remarks that Alter uses terms like "the author," "the narrator" or "the writer" interchangeably with "the redactor" (Berlinerbrau, 13).

[68] There are, of course, exceptions to this general trend, including theologian Rowan Williams, whose work I will address later in this chapter.

evidence to the contrary.[69] While allowing higher criticism a marginal role in exegetical reflection, theologians like Richard G. Burnett lament its "atomistic preoccupation with individual parts of the biblical witness," claiming that this approach can only amount to a "confusion over what the biblical witness as a whole is about: its actual content, subject matter and theme."[70] Earlier in the twentieth century, we find a similar interpretive admonition on the lips of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. While Barth, like Alter, allows a restricted space for higher critical inquiry as a "prolegomena" or *Hilfswissenschaft* to the proper work of scriptural exegesis, he insists that at the end of the day, reading the Bible on higher critical terms is "reading the Biblical canon differently from how it wants to be read."[71]

The division of interpretive labors implied in this discussion of the circumscribed benefits of the higher critical approach echoes an older debate in literary criticism between Umberto Eco and Jonathan Culler about the proper bounds of interpretive "understanding." Eco claimed that a text raises a distinct set of questions to its model reader that set the stage and determine the boundaries for true understanding. Culler, on the other hand, argued for the virtues of what he calls interpretive "overstanding"—that is, the productive work of posing questions to a text that the text itself would never raise to its model reader.[72] The literary and theological readers mentioned above seem to align their own modes of biblical interpretation with Eco's account of the limits of proper "understanding," painting higher critical contributions as a form of occasionally beneficial "overstanding," that nevertheless stands outside the bounds set by the text concerning the form of inquiry proper to it.

To consider the benefits of higher critical scholarship on these terms, however, is to preemptively determine the kind of questions that are "native" to biblical literature over and against

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[69] We see this, for example, in the work of Kevin Vanhoozer, who insists in one breath that "the most important thing we need to know about a text…is what kind of communicative act(s) it performs," but immediately next to this apparent commitment to let the material and structural features of the text drive interpretation, those features that bespeak its particular breed of communicative act, Vanhoozer adds : "the matter and energy of the Gospels is largely lost by historical-critical commentaries" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* [Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2002], 179).

[70] Richard E. Burnett, "Historical Criticism," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Trier (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 291.

[71] Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, 546. Translated from "den biblischen Kanon anders zu lesen, als er selber gelesen sein will." Barth adds that to read the Bible in this way is to misread what the words actually seek to bear witness to—the revelation of God. "The Bible cannot be read so unbiblically," Barth writes, "and in this case that means it cannot be read with such a disregard for its character even as a human word. It cannot be read so unhistorically."

[72] Jonathan Culler, "In Defense of Overinterpretation," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* by Umberto Eco with Christine Brooke-Rose, Jonathan Culler and Richard Rorty, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The term "overstanding" originates in the work of Wayne C. Booth. See Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 115.

those that can only be of marginal relevance to matters of literary or theological interpretation.[73] Indeed, amidst their aspersions against higher critical scholars' attention to the way inner-canonical frictions frustrate straightforward reading of the Bible, literary and theological readers would do well to consider whether they truly have the corner on the market in matters of "final form" or inner-canonical indications of how the text "wants to be read."

Between these second-wave literary critics and those who object to hypotheses about the divergent witness of various sources on dogmatic grounds,[74] higher critical approaches to Biblical literature came to be defined in large part by their detractors. Their legacy is narrated less with reference to their scholarly virtues or the literary interests from which their studies emerged than according to the perceived limits of their scholarly vision—limits their opponents worried would reduce the biblical text to timelines and historical speculation, postponing questions about the literary and theological meaning of these texts indefinitely.

There are certainly limits to any way of looking at a text—blindnesses and narrow habits of vision that attend any posture of reading.[75] But to accept this caricature of higher criticism as fundamentally uninterested in (or uninteresting for) literary readings of Biblical texts would be a serious misstep. Indeed, those who have drawn a clean line between these two schools of scholarship—between putatively "historical" investments on the one side and "literary" investments on the other—have passed on more than just an untenable oversimplification to their readers. In practice, this overly neat distinction has obscured not only the literary significance of questions about the frictive composition of biblical texts, but also the failures of these second-wave literary readers and narrative theologians to grapple with the interpretive import of these hermeneutic frictions for the study of the Bible as literature.[76]

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[73] John Barton remarks elsewhere: "One of the first things that students are taught in traditional courses on biblical criticism tends to be that the Bible is 'not a book, but a library of books'. In literary interpretations, this dictum is reversed, and the Bible is once again treated as one book, all its parts interrelated, with common themes and styles as a unified 'message'. Such an approach renders historical criticism otiose" (John Barton, "The Concept of 'History' Revisted—*Wirkungsgeschichte* and Reception History" in *Hebrew Bible-Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation* III/2, 112).

[74] See Chapter 3

[75] To be clear, I do not wish to champion either side of this fractious debate between historical and literary approaches to scripture, but rather to suggest that to do justice to the text we have received in our attempts to interpret it on both a literary and theological level, multiple "forms of attention" (to use Frank Kermode's phrase) may be required. (Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and Hamlet* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985]).

[76] That is not to say that there is no virtue to the interpretive practice of identifying deep unities in Biblical literature. Rather, it is important to identify that campaigns for the Bible's stylistic, theological or historical unity come at the expense of our attention to those disunities that are *also* characteristic of this body of literature.

The aim of this dissertation is to revisit the distinctly *literary* significance of classical literary criticism of the Bible, and, in so doing, to reconsider the theological import of the presence of serious literary frictions in the texts Christians have historically identified as scripture. The second aim is admittedly more ambitious, but is explicitly tied to the first, grounded in the work of narrative theologians (considered in my third chapter) to connect literary readings of Biblical texts with theological discourse and to insist that the literary structures of the Bible ought to have a strong hand in shaping subsequent theological reflection. These narrative theologians pose questions that ought to be extended not only to literary unities, but also to those parts of the biblical text that frustrate unity, or the clear perception of a singular plot. What can be said of this canon's plurality? What ought to be said, given the weight of its status as divine revelation, of the friction of its form, the tension between its various representations of floods and kings and even of God? What do we learn about God, or about the human work of knowing God, from the fact that the vehicle of God's divine revelation has appeared to us as manifold witness?

IV. Interpreting Friction

As long as there have been four gospels, two royal histories of Israel, or serious narrative discrepancies within and between the stories of the Patriarchs, readers who consider these texts to be component parts of their sacred canon have made every effort to make sense of these textual pluralities and to offer some account for the presence of literary problems within the vehicle of God's self-revelation.

There have been many attempts to reconcile these frictions, to take the text's multiple and diverse witnesses and meld them together into one coherent voice. The scribes at Qumran, for example, resolved hermeneutic issues in the Pentateuch by redacting and harmonizing divergent legal materials and preserving this smoother edited version of the original text in the *Temple Scroll*.[77] A few centuries later, a Christian Assyrian by the name of Tatian produced the *Diatessaron*—a harmony of the four gospel narratives[78] that wove these diverse and occasionally divergent testimonies of the life of Jesus into a single continuous plot. Tatian's *Diatessaron* was so popular that

[77] It should be noted, however, that the Temple Scroll claims to be an entirely separate revelation, and does not recognize itself as a redaction of the Torah. For more on this, see Gabrielle Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways Between Qumran and Enochic Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).
[78] As well as some extra-canonical materials. See William Lawrence Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Signficance and History in Scholarship* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

it would come to stand in place of the four gospels in Syrian churches until the independent texts re-emerged sometime around the fifth century.[79]

On the opposite end of the spectrum, divergences in the textual tradition have also been interpreted as cause to adjudicate between biblical witnesses, determining from among their divergent testimony more and less reliable narrators and subsequently eliminate whatever "erring" texts diverge from this more trustworthy testimony. In the second century, for example, a Christian leader named Marcion responded to the hermeneutic problems presented by the Bible's diverse witness by electing one reliable gospel witness.[80] Marcion selects Luke, and uses Luke's testimony to measure the relative veracity of other biblical materials. Driven by what Adolf von Harnack called a passionate "intention to know no other God than the one who had appeared in the Crucified One," Marcion saw the contradictions in the Christian canon (both between the various gospels' depiction of Jesus and between the two testaments' larger depiction of the character of God) as due cause for a radical re-assessment of the authority of the received tradition.[81]

Alongside efforts to harmonize the frictions implicit in the tradition or to eliminate divergences altogether, there have also been attempts to embrace the frictions between the Bible's divergent representations of singular objects, and to account for the presence of these differences theologically. We see this, for example, in some of the fragments we have of Origen's commentary on John's gospel.[82] Seeing an irreconcilable disagreement between the four evangelists regarding the time at which Jesus was supposed to have driven the money-changers from the temple (the gospel of John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry while Mark, Matthew and Luke locate it near the end, leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion), Origen reasons that the differences between the chronological location of this event within the plot of the gospel narratives must not be overcome or eliminated, but must rather be *interpreted*. In cases like these, "the spiritual truth was often preserved, one might say, in the material falsehood."[83] That is, for Origen a contrived date may

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[79] John Barton, "Two Types of Harmonization" in *What is it that Scripture Says: Essays in Biblical Interpretation, Translation, and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansbrough OSB,* ed. Phillip McCosker (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2007), 268.
[80] In this way, Marcion and Wellhausen share a common interpretive impulse—seeing difference between the testimony of biblical narrators as an incitement to make judgments between true, original material and later distortions of that material at the hands of those trying to manipulate the future of the tradition (both Marcion and Wellhausen point to manuscript corruption at the hands of the Jews, though Wellhausen also acknowledges similar corruptions within the later Christian community).
[81] Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 1.
[82] Only nine of the thirty-two books of Origen's gospel on John have been preserved.
[83] Origen, *Commentary on John*, Book X.4

bear its own kind of revelation. But that revelation remains hidden to those without eyes to see, hidden to those unwilling to admit the differences between the gospels or to those who are too quick to harmonize or expunge divergent witnesses.[84]

As early as the second century, textual commentators began to see these tensions as part of the hermeneutic curriculum they passed on to their students. A prominent Jewish sage by the name of Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (90-135), for example, passed on a set of thirteen rules to guide his disciples in their interpretation of Torah, the last of which specifically addresses the presence of literary problems like those identified by higher critical scholars.[85] The rule explains that when two passages of scripture appear to contradict one another, this tension should be solved with reference to a third passage—one that is able to clarify and thus resolve the tension between the first two. Centuries later, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) offered similar advice to his students, dedicating an entire treatise to the interpretive task of forming a stable consensus between the four gospels,[86] and arguing, in his commentary on the book of Psalms, that seeming contradictions in the scriptures were really just obscurities, designed as a form of pedagogy to exercise the reader who would, by her concentrated hermeneutic labors, receive the reward of their hidden meaning.[87]

While the presence of literary frictions in the Bible seemed a matter of some urgency to the tradition's first interpreters, and then again, in a different way, to those contemporary with the rise of higher criticism, these questions now appear to have been "asked and answered" by contemporary theologians,[88] or in any case largely fallen out of vogue.[89] More than three decades ago, the Religious Studies journal *Crosscurrents* published an article presenting itself as a posthumous review of the scholarly career of higher criticism within Christian theological discourse. The author

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[84] Augustine makes a similar claim when discussing what he understands to be productive divergences between the Hebrew version of Jonah and that which has been translated into Greek in the Septuagint, musing: "it is as if the reader who wants to cling to nothing more than the bare history of events were being roused from slumber by the seventy translators, as well as by the prophets themselves, and being prodded to search out prophecy's depth" (Augustine, *City of God*, Book 18 [New York: New City Press, 2013], 329).

[85] These rules were an expansion of the seven rules of Rabbi Hillel, and can be found in the introduction to the *Sifre.*

[86] See Augustine, *De Consensu Evangelistarum.*

[87] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* 147.10; see, also, Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* 2.18.28.

[88] And in many cases, the question is answered rather dismissively. Alvin Plantinga, for example, dismisses the historical critical enterprise entirely as part of the "Enlightenment project"—an odd blanket aspersion to cast on the period that gave us electricity. (Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism,* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 155).

[89] In fact, the argument could be made, and indeed has been made recently by theologian John Webster, that contemporary theology neglects not only scripture's hermeneutic difficulties, but also scripture itself as a source for constructive theological reflection. (John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch,* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 1).

claimed that while higher criticism "may still have a glorious future as a branch of history [it] would seem to be near the end of its career in theology."[90]

There are many ways we might account for the evaporation of this question from theological discourse. While debates about the status of biblical testimony and the nature of revelation loomed large in Christian theology during the first half of the twentieth century, in our time, theologian Ronald Thiemann writes, "a sense of revelation-weariness has settled over the discipline and most theologians have happily moved on to other topics of inquiry."[91] This is perhaps not unrelated to the widening disciplinary divide in the increasingly specialized American university system between theology and biblical studies, as well as the increasingly tired status of century-long debates over biblical "inerrancy"—debates that continue to fracture ecclesial bodies and academic guilds alike.[92] These debates now appear to have permanently placed theological questions about potential divergences in Biblical testimony within the camp of more conservative readers. Still, we might wish to consider whether something essential has been lost in the break between these two disciplines, in the refusal to capitulate to the terms of the debate over scriptural authority, or with the attempts to rescue the theological categories of "scripture" or "revelation" from the stronger implications of the source critical project by largely sidestepping or otherwise obfuscating these textual difficulties.

Rowan Williams takes up these questions about the strained relationship between higher criticism and theological reflection in two characteristically brief but remarkably suggestive essays. In the first of these essays, "Historical Criticism and Sacred Text," Williams writes, "it is theologically wrong-headed to write off the historical-critical method and its relevance for constructive theology." The desire to separate these two disciplines completely represents a desire to get outside of proper bounds of text as we have received it and to "secure a place for ourselves beyond mediation and history."[93] Twelve years later, Williams extends these reflections in another short essay, here

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[90] Charles Davis, "The Theological Career of Historical Criticism of the Bible," *Crosscurrents* 32 (1982): 267-284.
[91] Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 1.
[92] Over the last century, debates over "inerrancy"—or the claim that the Bible is a text without error, "being free from all falsehood, fraud or deceit"—have split the Lutherans, the Baptists and the Presbyterians (not to mention hundreds of smaller ecclesial bodies between). Within academic communities, the doctrine of inerrancy formed a breach among theologians that led to the creation of a new scholarly guild—the Evangelical Theological Society—which continues to bar entrance to anyone who cannot affirm this doctrine ("Article XIII: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," *International Council on Biblical Inerrancy* [Chicago: 1978]).
[93] Rowan Williams, "Historical Criticism and Sacred Text," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* ed. David Ford, Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 228.

specifically addressing the theological import of the fourfold character of the gospels.[94] Williams writes,

> A properly theological reading of scripture is one in which we pay attention to the way in which Scripture communicates as well as to what is being communicated—or rather, one in which we recognize that such a distinction is not particularly helpful in our study of the Bible. If it is true that the Bible tells us what we need to know for our temporal and eternal well-being, the mode of communication tells us something about God's way with human creation. It matters not only what God tells us, but what is communicated by the character of the communicating act.[95]

Williams raises important questions in each of these pieces about the way that theological understandings of the content of revelation have excluded "the character of the communicating act." In so doing, they have refused to consider that the peculiar means of divine revelation—the binding together of diffusive and diverse witnesses—bears a strong formal resemblance to other core Christian doctrines: a non-docetist Christology,[96] the Trinity, the diversity of the body of Christ across time and space, to name just a few.[97] "The gospels accustom our eyes to multiple but convergent vision," Williams writes, "for which any one self-consistent narration or representation may be both accurate and inadequate."[98] Higher criticism provides rich resources to constructive theology in that it offers the opportunity to return *ad fontes,* to see again the "irreducibly different," manifold quality of the witness of its sources—each "strictly irreducible to the others and irreducible to general statements about divine nature or gospel truth."[99]

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[94] Rowan Williams, "The Fourfold Chord: Theology and Plurality in the Gospel Witness," in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honor of John Webster,* ed. R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, Justin Stratis (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
[95] Rowan Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 339.
[96] There are those who argue that the analogy between the docetist controversy and modern debates about the humanity and divinity of scripture is too weak to be helpful or instructive. See Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513-528.
[97] Here Wiliams offers a reflection on the Body of Christ with a decisively Schleiermachian bent: "It is not too difficult to extrapolate from this to the whole nature of the Body of Christ on earth as St. Paul envisages it: the historical form of Christ's continuing existence-as-community (to borrow Bonhoeffer's expression) is one in which any holy life may consistently and intelligibly represent Christ but cannot do so in isolation from all other holy lives. Each life lived in the Spirit becomes a distinct mode of Christ's self-giving to other lives and to the whole world. No sanctified individual exhaustively represents Christ, and the unlimited diversity of the ways in which Christ's identity is manifest in community becomes one of the paths leading us into the recognition of the divine (inexhaustible) nature of that identity" (Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 345).
[98] Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 344. He goes on to say, "The gospels say, in effect, that identity is complex and many-sided; that at any one point in time we shall not be able to say everything that it is right to say, and that we need the time to entertain and become used to a movement between positions and registers in order to speak the truth about who we are and who Christ is."
[99] Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 345.

In the past, when higher criticism was allowed into the theological conversation, it was given a small and circumspect place at the table. Its role was construed in principally *negative* terms[100]—that is, with reference to its capacity to critique modes of reading determined in some way inappropriate to their object of attention, readings determined more by dogma than exegesis.[101] In this way, higher critics were imagined as watchmen (albeit with limited authority): guarding the sanctity of what John Barton terms a text's "factuality"—that is, "its refusal to say just what we would like it to say."[102] It is this property of higher criticism that in recent years has served as a tool for feminist and postcolonial exegesis, enabling these discourses to reach beyond the confines of dogmatic interpretation and clarify the social structures that animate the construction of Biblical law, myth and collective memory.[103]

The aim of this project is not to contest the "negative" capacities of higher critical enquiry to chasten and emend exegetical reflection. Instead, I aim to further Williams' suggestion (with help from Williams at several intervals) that higher criticism also provides its own substantive "positive" contributions to constructive theological discourse. While these positive contributions are likely manifold, within the space of this dissertation I will focus on just one. In the following chapters, I consider the textual data that stands at the ground of the higher critical enterprise—what Williams refers to as the "hermeneutical problem" provoked by the plurality and diversity of the Biblical witness.[104] In the space of this dissertation, I refer to this phenomenon not as a hermeneutic problem but as *hermeneutic friction*, a term that acknowledges the interpretive difficulties presented by these literary tensions, while still pointing to the possibility that these seeming obstacles to

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[100] Hans Frei writes of Karl Barth, for example, "If he found it possible to have historical criticism and the doctrine of inspiration together it was by virtue of the fact that the best historical criticism had, in effect, a self-destruct mechanism built into it. That is to say, then, that there was no *positive* relation between historical criticism and theology but only a *negative*, mutually exclusive one" (Hans W. Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative," in *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture,* ed. George Hunsinger [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012], 54).

[101] See, for example: George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1981); Richard E. Burnett, "Historical Criticism" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 290-292.

[102] John Barton, "The Future of Old Testament Study" in *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 166.

[103] That is not at all to say that feminist or postcolonial approaches to biblical texts have existed in a consistently harmonious relationship to historical criticism. To the contrary, feminist and post-colonial biblical scholars have raised some of the strongest objections to the dominance of the historical critical method in biblical studies over the last several decades. For both sides of that conversation, see: *Her Master's Tools?: Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse,* ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Feminist Christology and Historical Reconstruction" in *Feminists Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 86-110; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Esther Fuchs, "Biblical Feminisms: Knowledge, Theory, Politics in the Study of Women in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 208.

[104] Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 338.

hermeneutic reflection might also, by means of their frictive character, spark or generate new forms of thought.

"Scripture can be distinguished from fiction by its frictionality," literary critic Geoffrey Hartman writes, "not only its respect for friction, which exists also in literary texts, but its capacity to leave traces—which incite and even demand interpretation of what it has incorporated."[105] By friction, Hartman means something like what the higher critics meant when they talked about compositional fissures: the fact that the Hebrew Bible preserves within itself a "fusion of heterogeneous stories or types of discourse"—a fusion that recalls not only "the aesthetic problem of blending them into a unified whole," but also the contests of authorities and traditions that stand behind these competing, heterogeneous representations. For Hartman, these frictions stand in the text as sites of productive tension and "determinate indeterminacy" that form a tangible, beckoning invitation to the reader—not unlike the fleshly form of Jacob's mysterious sparring partner in Genesis 32—to wrestle and indeed to struggle with the text.[106]

Though Hartman does not expand his account of "friction" beyond this highly suggestive paragraph at the end of this brief essay,[107] we might speculate further as to why this term "friction" is fitting to the phenomenon Hartman seeks to describe—both on a textual level (the juxtaposition of competing narrative or legal traditions), and a hermeneutic level (the way the difficulties described in the former can rub a reader right or wrong, so to speak, or perhaps even the way these difficulties prompted certain choices on the part of the redactors—to stich seams between disparate materials).

It is the capacity of frictions between various representations of singular objects in biblical literature to "incite and even demand interpretation" that makes them *hermeneutic*. That is, these frictions incite a field of interpretive activity, poled by juxtaposed, divergent representations that form the verbal conditions of a particular mode of exegetical reflection.[108] In the words of Rabbinics scholar Michael Fishbane, these inner-textual dissimilarities "tease the listener to anticipate a closure

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[105] Geoffrey Hartmann, "The Struggle for the Text," in *A Critics Journey: Literary Reflections, 1958-1998* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 81.
[106] Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," 73.
[107] Indeed, Hartman's brief comments about the frictionality of the Hebrew Bible have proved to be one of the landmark descriptions of Biblical prose. See, for example, Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 33; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 326-7; Illana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 121.
[108] By juxtaposed, I mean first, the material proximity of some of these frictions (such as the numerous divergent directions placed together in the Noah story) or second, in a wider sense, the common membership of divergent representations in a singular canon.

of this gap through mediating rhetorical strategies."[109] In other words, the term "friction" functions in a double sense, representing both the friction between adjacent, heterogeneous texts, and between these texts and the expectations of the reader. Unexpected frictions entice the listener (or interpreter) by virtue of both their juxtaposition in a unified canon and their dissimilarity—presenting a particular set of verbal conditions: the juxtaposition for their relation, and the dissimilarity for their dynamic opposition.[110] These verbal conditions invite the reader, in turn, to momentarily forfeit the Bible's binding, as well as their prior understandings, in order to see the unity of the tradition less as a foregone conclusion and more as an ongoing interpretive task.[111] In this way these frictions enable, in part, the endless renewal of the hermeneutic process, if only in that these difficulties refuse to be permanently resolved, but stand instead, in the words of Friedrich Schleiermacher as "ongoing instructions for the [hermeneutic] procedure."[112]

How, exactly, do these frictions offer instructions for the hermeneutic process? "A common, though sometimes overlooked, fact about narrative," Adam Newton writes, "[is] that the story it frequently tells is a story of storytelling."[113] By this, he means that narratives are "participatory acts," composed in part by what is "said" but also by the "saying" of it—by the inter-subjective relation that this act of saying invokes between a text and its reader. Newton explains that narratives have a way of binding their readers in particular ways, creating a sense of "immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text" and making them "responsible," to use Sartre's term, for what they have witnessed.[114]

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[109] Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2.

[110] Here, we might think of words Schleiermacher once said in regards to the nature of the Biblical canon. In the manuscripts for his *Hermeneutics,* Schleiermacher writes, "when rightly understood, the infinite significance of the Holy Scriptures is not in contradiction to its hermeneutic limitations" (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts,* ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman [Missoula: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977], 55).

[111] This is an insight of Benjamin Sommer's, who will appear more prominently in the final chapter. Sommer writes in *Revelation and Authority:* "If we are willing to pay the price of losing the Bible's binding, we will be more than amply rewarded by a renewed ability to see the essential unity of scripture and tradition"[111] (Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015], 25).

[112] Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts,* 15.

[113] Adam Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

[114] Newton, *Narrative Ethics,* 13. Newton quotes Sartre who I will here quote at greater length: "You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it. For freedom is not experienced by its enjoying its free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative. This absolute end, this imperative which is transcendent yet acquiesced in, which freedom itself adopts as its own, is what we call a value. The work of art is a value because it is an appeal" (Jean-Paul Sartre, "Writing" in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings,* ed. Stephen Priest (London: Routledge, 2001), 267.

What kind of storytelling do we find in biblical literature? While this is by no means a novel question, its answer rarely if ever includes an account of the periodic frictions in the Bible's literary form. An account of the discursive strategies that structure the Bible's form of "saying" what it intends to say cannot be complete without attention to the internal tensions it decidedly preserves. If, as narrative theologians have argued, the discursive strategies of biblical narrative ought to bind readers not only to the words of the text but also to particular habits of thought and attention—what role do hermeneutic frictions play in this process? How does the fourfold gospel, for example, apprentice our readerly vision—causing us to move back and forth, perhaps, between the distinct voices of the four independent witnesses, and in so doing offering a kind of instruction in how we might interpret both among and between these witnesses?[115] How might this hermeneutic apprenticeship, in turn, prove useful not only in our reading of the Bible, but also in our interpretation of the wider diversity of the theological tradition?[116]

V. The Argument in Brief

To reconsider the significance of hermeneutic frictions for our literary and theological engagements with the Bible, we must move these frictions out of their strict compartmentalization within the realm of historical inquiry. This requires a propaedeutic re-narration of a rather long chapter in the history of biblical scholarship—commencing with a return to the substantive literary foundations and literary investments of a form of scholarship long considered the strongest antagonist to literary engagements with the Bible, viz., higher criticism. This dissertation does not wish to canonize the higher critical approach, nor claim that the aims and ends of its practitioners are or ought to be in the service of Christian theology. It does, however, wish to illustrate the ways in which higher criticism might help us to rediscover the hermeneutic potential of these frictions in our literary and theological reading of these texts. The following chapters narrate how we came to see hermeneutic frictions as an object of historical rather than literary or theological interest, and to make a case for why it ought to be otherwise.

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[115] Rowan Williams raises a much broader version of this question at the beginning of his book *The Edge of Words* when he begins his text by asking: "Does the way we talk as human beings tell us anything about God?" This dissertation tries to find a narrower approach to Williams' broader question, looking at a particular phenomenon—friction—within historical speech—that of biblical narrators. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words,* lx.

[116] Which is, as Erich Auerbach once said of scripture "schwer von ihrem Gewordensein"—that is, "heavy with the fullness of having had to be formed" Erich Auerbach, "Die Narbe des Odysseus," *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 1949); trans. Geoffrey Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," 81.

To do so, I begin by turning to the rise of higher criticism itself, focusing not on comparative investigations of the historical events and personages described by the biblical text with any external representations, nor the comparative study of various manuscript traditions (what is traditionally called "text criticism"), but on the internal literary problems that emerged for nineteenth century biblical scholars as they were trying to make sense of the text on its own terms, without recourse to external evidence. This includes, but is not limited to: the Source Criticism of the Pentateuch, the comparison of various histories in the Hebrew Bible, and the investigation into the Synoptic Problem of the New Testament. In my second chapter, I focus on Julius Wellhausen's critical work and his attempt to synthesize these three instances of literary tension in the canon with reference to a theory of unreliable authorship. Wellhausen offers a paradigmatic case of how the higher critical approach to the Bible's internal fissures and frictions came to be associated with a low view of literary integrity and human authorship—a view that caused later literary readers to disregard these frictions entirely.

Wellhausen is certainly best known for his identification of literary problems within the Pentateuch, and his infamous "supersessionist" framing of the discrepancies between the sources—distinguishing the "true seed" of revelation from the "Judaizing" tendencies of later authors. But when we read his work on the Hebrew Bible together with his commentaries on the Gospels, his work takes on a new valence. In Wellhausen's *Evangelienkommentare*, he develops similar criteria for distinguishing the chronological relationship between the gospel materials—marking off texts as "late" that display an "ecclesiaticizing" tendency to accommodate the historical Jesus to the needs and concerns of the early church. Reading his classical work on the Pentateuch alongside his yet un-translated work on the synoptic gospels reveals deeper prejudices—not simply against Jewish rite or ritual—but toward what he deems to be "tradition growth" and the visible marks of human *poesis* or the creative adaptation of prior materials. These adaptations, on Wellhausen's view, are always the product of an "unreliable narrator" who warps the content of original revelation in the direction of a more institutionalized form of religious life. Wellhausen's reading of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provides a case study of how the self-identified literary reading practices of higher critical scholars caused later literary readers who were invested in the integrity of the canon to dismiss not only the higher critical method of reading, but also its data, yielding the study of the inner-canonical frictions to historical scholarship, and exiling these textual elements from the province of literary inquiry.

In my third chapter, I look at the rise of the "Bible as Literature" movement as a reaction to these developments at the turn of the twentieth century. In response to anxieties over higher criticism's fragmentation of the Biblical text and the suspicion that accompanied source critical readings regarding the creative and interpretive work of human authors, scholars of the Bible and comparative literature began to advocate for the application of literary methods to the study of biblical texts. These advocates cast their enterprise in apologetic terms, as a defense of the enduring value of this text against its cultured despisers, offering these books a sense of literary integrity and coherence. They recast the Bible's authority on aesthetic rather than historical grounds, arguing that "no principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole."[117]

In this chapter, I locate the arrival of the modern "Bible as Literature" movement in the wake of wider debates about the moral or spiritual value of fiction—particularly among Christian readers. While the rise of popular fiction was originally interpreted as a noxious social force bent on deforming the moral habits of its readers, writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens began to change public opinion about the moral efficacy of literary fiction. Scholars like Richard G. Moulton took advantage of these changing tides to recast prior aspersions about the fictional quality of large sections of Biblical literature in a positive light, making scriptural fables the substance of a properly edifying "liberal education."[118] By making a case for the application of literary methods to the study of scriptural texts, these scholars made the previously threatening fact of the human construction of these texts into a source for their dignity. In their attempt to lend these texts aesthetic weight, these advocates pushed firmly for a sense of literary coherence, going so far as to eliminate textual doubles from the canon in order to make a Bible more suitable for literary reading. By erring on the side of literary unity, these scholars ultimately offered their readers few resources to interpret the hermeneutic frictions of biblical narration that higher criticism laid bare.

In my fourth chapter, I turn to the work of narrative theologians who similarly argue for a return to literary approaches to scriptural texts in the wake of the higher critical movement. Narrative theologians challenge the assumptions that characterize debates over the authority of scripture and argue for a return to "narrative" readings of scripture as the remedy to the damage

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[117] Richard Green Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible, The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha Presented in Modern Literary Form* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895), 1718.
[118] Richard Green Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895).

inflicted by both modern biblical scholarship and significant "misturns" in modern theology. In this chapter, I engage the work of Hans Frei, who lays much of the foundation for the narrative turn in biblical hermeneutics and theological reflection. While Frei argues that theology should be guided by the literary form of biblical narratives, he reads this form as a composite: a single "gospel" story without significant internal tensions between juxtaposed narrators, forfeiting significant portions of the gospels' literary form in order to commend attention to what he calls the unified pattern of the story's narration. I turn from Frei's project to the work of three of his students—Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher and Kathryn Tanner. Each of these students, now prominent theologians in their own right, affirm the virtues of their mentor's theological reflection on the forms and structures of biblical narrative while at the same time pushing against the limits of Frei's predilection for narrative unity—calling for attention to the Bible's diverse and frictive narrative witness.

I turn in my fifth chapter to look at the way that these concerns were taken up in an alternative mode within the literary imaginations of two nineteenth-century novelists. While the Bible as Literature school and narrative theologians each attempted to *resolve* the textual "problems" or hermeneutic frictions illuminated by higher critics, novelists like George Eliot and Herman Melville (who were themselves familiar with higher critical scholarship) explore contradictions between narrators or opposing angles of vision as sources of textual meaning. Taking a close look not at these novels' engagement with scripture *per se*, but rather at the way these novelists depict such hermeneutic frictions as constitutive of the ordinary processes of understanding—both between human persons (as in Eliot's *Middlemarch*) and toward an object of study or attention (as in Melville's *Moby Dick*). I propose that these novelists open new possibilities for interpreting frictions in biblical texts. These novels invite us to consider how the presence of such frictions in a text that various communities identify as the vehicle of divine revelation might be not only literarily meaningful, but also theologically salient: offering a rich theological anthropology in their depiction of the limits of human perception that are nonetheless graced, nonetheless inspired. While there are certainly other nineteenth century novels that would prove similarly illuminating, these two make for a sharp case study into the representation of both what Eliot terms the "incalcubly diffusive" quality of so many objects of our attention and the hermeneutic processes that seek to comprehend them, and help to claim this diffusiveness as constitutive of the hermeneutic process itself.

Finally, in my sixth and final chapter, I consider how the insights of these nineteenth century novelists might be taken back to the hermeneutic questions posed by higher critics to see whether

the friction between competing authorial perspectives—what once seemed like contradictions or outright "errors"—can be not only literarily meaningful, but also theologically meaningful. I take up several instances of hermeneutic friction in the canon, looking at the two juxtaposed narratives of creation, the cacophony surrounding the revelation at Sinai and the variance between the gospel writer's accounts of the resurrection. By offering a literary reading of these frictions that considers their theological significance—how the frailty of human perception meets and somehow mediates the grandeur of God—I argue that the friction between the testimony of biblical narrators provides a new way forward for literary and theological readings of the Bible.

Employing the work of Mary Gerhart and Paul Ricoeur, this final chapter also considers the ways in which attention to "genre" might provide a hermeneutic relationship to text that is not determinative and classifying but rather open and dialectic, maintaining the tension between juxtaposed and divergent representations of singular objects and reclaiming the friction between these pictures as a meaningful part of this sacred literature. For Gerhart, the term "genre" does not represent a process of classification (as was the characteristic interpretive mode the early movements in both the Bible as Literature school and the Narrative theology movement), but an active process of readerly negotiation—an ongoing hermeneutic activity in which interpretive expectations are formed, subverted and then reformed again and again. While genres are "initially hypotheses for reading texts, pretending to be at the service of readers" they later "quietly subvert the worlds of meaning that produce them."[119] On this account, the experience of friction between initial readerly expectations and the text that lies in front of them is a *necessary* part of the interpretive process and a goad toward ongoing hermeneutic engagement.

For Ricoeur, the fact that the Bible narrates God by means of different genres of literature provides instruction in how its readers should think about theology as the task of *naming* God. The way that biblical poetry names God is quite different than the way that biblical law names God—but these discourses find their original meaning by way of their juxtaposition with other modes of speech and attention. Ricoeur argues that this juxtaposition creates a "living dialectic" between variant perspectives that displays their productive "interferences with one another," and so yields a model of theological discourse in which the friction between opposing ways of seeing becomes hermeneutically productive.[120]

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[119] Mary Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 15.
[120] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 215-227, 221.

These accounts of the role of genre in hermeneutic activity can be of particular use in the study of a text like scripture, whose parts are presented as a coherent whole, though they are, in various ways, at odds with one another. While multiple "competing" narrative styles could only be a hermeneutic *problem* within a static understanding of genre, this dynamic reading of genre allows us to see the process of making literary judgments that are later contested by further reading as a necessary part of the hermeneutic process. While the Bible's composite form seems particularly prone to these moments of contestation, we might say that the hermeneutic spiral, in this case, is wide and deep. Misunderstanding, or a "misfit" between prior interpretations and what lies on the page before us becomes on these terms an occasion to go "further up, further in"—both in our interpretation of a single narrative and in our sense of the whole.

Implicit in this engagement with hermeneutic friction is a claim that *everything* about a text—every detail, every seeming conflict of plot, every apparent decision in a process of redaction—is worthy of interpretation. This might be parsed as a theological commitment with regards to the status of the Bible as scripture; but it is also a literary commitment. We find this exacting hermeneutic demand exemplified in Hellenistic criticism of Homer, or in modern readings of Milton, Dante or Shakespeare. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote, "poetry…has a logic of its own, as severe as that of science, and more difficult because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes." This logic, on Coleridge's terms, demands that "there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word…the peculiar fitness of the word in the original text."[121] While heeding Coleridge's hermeneutic charge to reason with all parts of a text, this project looks not at the peculiar fitness of words and stories, but takes as its object the peculiar *misfitnessses* of this text, the frictions between the Bible's various representations of singular objects—its characters, laws, events.

Hartman, Williams, Ricoeur and Gerhart encourage us to ask questions, as I will within these pages, about how these peculiar textual misfitnesses may challenge and subsequently inform those working hypotheses that recognized or qualified them as "misfits" in the first place. What might we learn from the friction between biblical narrators' varied or contradictory representations of the objects of their common attention about the grace extended to limited perceptions? And what can we learn by virtue of the preservation of these frictions within our sacred canon, about the way our

[121] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria.* I, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9-10

tradition has preserved not only texts and stories, but also particular tasks for reading and interpretation? What readerly virtues might we forfeit by removing or otherwise obfuscating textual frictions in the name of simplifying the Bible's narrative witness in order to shore up its integrity and authority?

There is, of course, more than one Bible, more than one construal of which books compose the Bible and stand as scripture to a given community. Because I have chosen, for good or for ill, to draw on the history of the interpretation of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and to draw on the hermeneutic work of both Jewish and Christian readers, it is necessary to say up front that what Hans Frei understands as the Bible is not the same as what Robert Alter understands as the Bible. For Jewish readers, the Bible is the Hebrew Bible, which stands in close relationship to the Oral Torah that accompanies it; for Protestant readers, their Bible includes both the Hebrew Bible (often called the Old Testament) and the books of the New Testament; for Catholic readers, the Bible includes both testaments as well as a few additional books deemed "deuterocanonical" (or "apocryphal"). Each of these traditions has different norms of translation and different manuscripts that are taken as the authoritative original text. The main figures I consider in my narration of the history of literary reading over the last century of biblical scholarship—Julius Wellhausen, Richard Moulton and Hans Frei—are all Protestant readers. The interlocutors I engage at intervals in my constructive account—Joel Baden, Benjamin Sommer, Rowan Williams, Paul Ricoeur, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mary Gerhart—represent all three traditions. In this way, I have taken up an issue particular in its own way to Protestant biblical hermeneutics, and have tried to find a way past the tired antagonisms that characterize conversations about the internal tensions in the Bible in this interpretive community by drawing on a broad range of interlocutors invested in analogous but distinctive conversations within their own reading communities.

It is the aim of this dissertation to consider, first, how the conflicts between Biblical narrators became classified as elements of historical concern with little to no import for literary readings of this text (or theological reflections on the text's literary form); and second, how these same hermeneutic frictions might give rise to new forms of both literary and theological reflection—in both the singular act of interpretation and in our larger considerations of the nature of revelation or of our speech about God; and finally, how they might give rise also to feeling—to an encounter with a sacred text that mirrors the nature of human perception and human understanding and thus stands as a sign of sanctified human fallibility.

Chapter Two | *Higher Criticism and the Unreliable Narrator*

The history of biblical scholarship is in large part a sequence of attempts to come to grips with the composite character of the biblical text.[1]

JOHN J. COLLINS

The problem we have set before us is not an imaginary one, but actual and urgent…for the Law, if by that word we understand the entire Pentateuch, is no literary unity and no simple historical quantity.[2]

JULIUS WELLHAUSEN

[1] John J. Collins, "Methods in Biblical Study," *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and Deutero-Canonical Books* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 16.
[2] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel,* 6.

I. Wellhausen's Legacy

There is perhaps no one more readily identified with higher critical study of the Bible than German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).[3] Wellhausen's name has become a virtual stand-in for the substantive contributions of higher criticism as well as its seasoned caricature as outdated "objectivist" historicism.[4] He is often remembered as the father of modern biblical scholarship, but this is not always a laudatory title.[5] For many religious readers of the Bible, Wellhausen is a symbol of a tragic, enduring break between critical and confessional postures toward Biblical composition.[6] Jewish readers in particular see Wellhausen's scholarship on the Hebrew Bible as a prime example of the scholarly dignification of anti-Semitism, memorializing him as "the anti-Semitic epigone of Biblical criticism"[7] or "the father of those who employ a writer's razor to cut all our holy books into shreds."[8] Honored by some as having "presented the most sovereign survey of Old Testament scholarship we possess," Wellhausen is at the same time demeaned by association with every passing scholarly fad, alternatively dubbed "Hegelian,"[9] "Darwinian,"[10] or even overly

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[3] See Rudolf Smend, "The Work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen" in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation III/1*: *The Nineteenth Century,* ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 425; Janice Capel Anderson writes that Wellhausen's Pentateuchal scholarship "dominates scholarly analysis to the present day—whether by assent, modification or rejection" (Janice Capel Anderson, "Source, Form, Redaction and Literary Criticism of the Bible" in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 4, From 1750 to the Present*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015], 150).

[4] See Walter Wink, "The Bankruptcy of the Biblical Critical Paradigm" in *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm in Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973).

[5] The "father of modern biblical scholarship" is a contested title. Other potential heirs title-bearers include Baruch Spinoza, Richard Simon, Thomas Hobbes, Hermann Samuel Reimarus and, strangely enough, John Calvin.

[6] Nestor Miguez and Daniel Bruno, "The Bible in Latin America," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 4, From 1750 to the Present* ed. John Riches (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 445.

[7] E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959), quoted by Rudolf Smend, "The Work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen," 451.

[8] Y.E. Melamed, *Sefer shivtei Yisrael,* as quoted by Yaacov Shavit and Mordecai Eran, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn: From Holy Scripture to the Book of Books, A History of Biblical Culture* trans. Chaya Naor (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2007), 98. At the same time, Wellhausen was a close friend of Hermann Cohen, who wrote of him after his death: "This man with his clear, piercing eyes, who had perhaps never been deceived by any human being, had certainly never seriously have been overtaken by the shadow of a doubt in God. As far as that profoundest foundation stone of religion is concerned, this great philologist remained life-long the simple pastor's son from Hameln" (Hermann Cohen, "Julius Wellhausen. Ein Abschiedsgruβ," in *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte* (1918): 178-181, quoted by Rudolf Smend, "The Work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen," 453).

[9] This assessment is common, but was famously summarized by Martin Kegel who drew a genealogical chain, using Wellhausen's mentor Johann Karl Wilhelm Vatke to justify the close connection between the two thinkers, claiming: "Hegel begat Vatke, Vatke begat Wellhausen" (Martin Kegel, *Los von Wellhausen!* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1923), 10, quoted by John Barton, "Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*," in *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 171.

[10] Franz Delitzsch once claimed that Wellhausen's critical scholarship was "merely applications of Darwinism to the sphere of theology and criticism" (A comment made to a visitor in 1882, quoted by John Barton, "The Concept of 'History' Revisited—*Wirkungsgeschicte* and Reception History" in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* III/2, 98.)

"rationalistic."[11] As his biographer[12] Rudolf Smend writes, "no Old Testament scholar has been read with so much admiration, and none has been so bitterly opposed."[13]

Wellhausen's biblical criticism is often contextualized as "historical" scholarship, in relationship to the rise of a certain romantic historicism[14] within the German university system in the mid-nineteenth century.[15] This is due, in part, to Wellhausen's own articulation of his scholarly investment in the study of biblical source documents as an interest in the reconstruction of history—what he christens the exegetical science of "sacred archeology"[16]— into a series of discrete, progressive stages in Israel's religious life and communal identity—each with its own respective *Weltanschauung*. This consonance further extends to Wellhausen's predilection toward evaluative judgments about the relative sophistication and religious consciousness of these various periods: ranging from a deep regard for natural, individual, and spontaneous elements of religious experience to a predictable aversion toward regimented cultic practice and hierocratic law.[17]

But aside from this familial resemblance to his scholarly context, there are reasons to read Wellhausen's scholarship in a different light. Wellhausen's legacy largely stems from the fact that he moved his study of biblical composition beyond a strictly historical frame, taking the conversation from seemingly endless chronological rearrangements of source materials to an account of the literary and theological significance of the differences between these sources. Despite the self-identified historical thrust of Wellhausen's interest in biblical composition, it is not clear that 'history' is the best category for interpreting the type of investigation we find in Wellhausen's

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[11] See, for example, Charles A. Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture: The Principles, Methods, History and Results of its Several Departments and of the Whole* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899).
[12] Smend is still in the process of completing what will be the first biography of Julius Wellhausen.
[13] Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 91. In the summer of 1901, Wellhausen was even decorated by Kaiser William of Prussia, which the New York Times reported as no small surprise "due to the fact that Prof. Wellhausen is the most radical of German Biblical critics and politically an extreme leftist" ("Kaiser Decorates a Biblical Critic," *New York Times,* June 27, 1901).
[14] The scholarly movement loosely called "historicism" is notoriously difficult to define. For a more thorough introduction to this complex school of thought (and its equally complex reception by modern interpreters) See Magne Saebo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation III/1: From Modernism to Post-Modernism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Robert Oden, "Historical Understanding and Understanding the Religion of Israel," in *Community, Identity and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* ed. Charles E. Carter, Carol L. Myers (Winona Lake: Eisenbraums, 1996), 201-229.
[15] Karl William Weyde, for example, writes that "Wellhausen was first and foremost a *historian* and source criticism was only a means by which he could reconstruct the history and religious development of ancient Israel" (Karl William Weyde, "Studies on the Historical Books—Including Their Relationship to the Pentateuch," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament III/1,* 533).
[16] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 1, 13.
[17] See Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels. The *Prolegomena* limits the scope of its inquiry to the words on the pages of a single canonical body of texts,[18] foregoing any attempt at comparative history and overlooking entirely the possibility of any "preliterary developments of the traditions."[19] Indeed, one of the most significant criticisms levied against Wellhausen by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*[20] that would both carry on and adapt his scholarly legacy was that his scholarship all too often *neglected* significant resources at his disposal about the social-historical context of these compositions (resources that might have otherwise illumined his reading of Israelite religion).[21] Wellhausen's investigations of the history of biblical composition were never at odds with the work of literary analysis. In fact, as John Hayes argues, the two were intimately intertwined in his biblical exegesis as "two aspects of a single activity."[22] Readings of Wellhausen that address his controversial reconstruction of Israelite history all too often neglect the shape of his interest in biblical *historiography*—his attention to the various strategies by which Israel's narrative and legal traditions were designed and preserved in national memory.[23]

Toward the end of the *Prolegomena* Wellhausen writes, "*Konstruiren muss man bekanntlich die Geschicte immer… die Unterschied ist nur, ob man gut oder schlect konstruirt*," ("Man will always construct history, the difference is only whether one constructs well or ill").[24] Here, Wellhausen betrays a deep investment not simply in biblical history *as such*, but in the choices and strategies that inform its various and varied constructions. This form of textual analysis—distinguishing and evaluating

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[18] This claim is particularly true of the text that will serve as the main focus for this chapter, Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*, as well as his commentary on the gospel narratives. There are other works of Wellhausen's that might be considered more conventionally "historical" in nature, like his text critical comparison of the Masoretic version of the books of Samuel with the Septuagint and other ancient manuscripts in *The Text of the Books of Samuel*.

[19] Douglas Knight writes, "As a matter of principle, Wellhausen considered the preliterary developments of the traditions to be irrecoverable, and consequently for historiography he focused the entirety of his literary analyses on written stages" (Douglas Knight, "Wellhausen and the Interpretation of Israel's Literature," *Semeia* 25 [1982], 30).

[20] Joachim Schaper, "Biblical Theology" in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation III.1: From Modernism to Post Modernism* ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co., 2013), 649. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which included scholars such as Hermann Gunkel, William Wrede, and Ernst Troeltsch, gleaned an attentiveness from Wellhausen to the rise and development of biblical religion. But these scholars examined this process of evolution in terms of its engagements with other religious traditions. (See Ernst Troeltsch, "Dogmatics of Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*"* in *The American Journal of Theology* 17 (1913): 1-21).

[21] See, for example, Hermann Gunkel's criticism of Wellhausen's neglect of comparative ancient near eastern mythology in his interpretation of the book of Revelation in Hermann Gunkel, "The Religio-Historical Interpretation of the New Testament," *The Monist* 13 (1903): 398-455.

[22] John Hayes makes this point briefly when he argues that Wellhausen is "the first to produce a history of Israel in which there was a thorough integration of literary criticism and historical reconstruction. The two movements were not viewed as two separate activities but as two aspects of a single activity" (John H. Hayes, *Interpreting Ancient Israelite History, Prophecy and Law* ed. Brad E. Kelle [Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013], 106).

[23] Wellhausen betrays his interest in the evolution of ideas and concepts over and against the bare facts of history in one of the later sections of the *Prolegomena*. Wellhausen writes, "Almost more important to me than the phenomena themselves are the presuppositions which lie behind them" (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 368.)

[24] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* (1883), 365.

divergent modes of interpreting and subsequently constructing history—is, as John Barton also argues, "much more a literary than a historical procedure."[25] Indeed, near the end of his life, after a subsequent generation of Pentateuchal scholars contested many of the smaller points within Wellhausen's source critical analysis, Wellhausen held fast to the substance of his literary insights, writing, "details I surrender; [but] with regard to the general way of viewing the literary process through which the Pentateuch came into being, I believe that I have pointed research in the right direction."[26]

In the following pages I put forth what I take to be a relatively simple claim: Wellhausen's attention to the discrepancies between the ways that singular events, characters, histories or rituals are narrated within the biblical canon, and his conviction that these diverse narrations ought to be in some way interpreted, is at its most basic level a *literary* reading of the text. While in the end Wellhausen's textual analysis yields a hypothesis about the historical conditions that stand behind the production of what Wellhausen shows to be an internally diverse canon, the smaller, more minute stages of his critical work are dedicated to investigating matters of literary *genre*. Wellhausen is principally invested in bringing into relief the distinct sets of hermeneutic procedures and literary strategies that operate side-by-side within the Biblical canon. To this end, he deploys pre-existent theories of textual composition (specifically, the documentary hypothesis) in order to name and separate these distinctive voices and textual "genres" and subsequently to consider the relationship between these discrete, juxtaposed approaches to biblical historiography.[27]

While there are many different ways to account for frictions in biblical composition,[28] here, I consider just one: examining the particular formulation of source criticism laid out in Wellhausen's treatment of the discrepancies between source materials in the Hexateuch and his parallel treatment of similar tensions between the witness of the various gospel narratives.[29] I have elected to use

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[25] John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 35.
[26] Letter to Theodor Nödelke, 21 April 1900, quoted by Rudolf Smend, "In the Wake of Wellhausen," 476.
[27] By "biblical historiography," I mean to include the broad reconstruction of Israel's past—including both narrative and legal traditions and well as the ritual history of this community.
[28] See, for example, David Carr's *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, in which he attends to these frictions not as an index of the awkward combination of prior source materials, but as a set of techniques common to scribal cultures in the ancient world, designed to mark spaces of emendation and expansion. (David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]).
[29] I use both "source criticism" and "redaction criticism" here because I want to draw attention to a set of common strategies that Wellhausen employs whether he is engaging tensions between the putative source materials in the Hebrew Bible, conflicts between the histories in Samuel and Kings and that in Chronicles, as well as discrepancies between the gospel narratives. While Wellhausen is best known for his work with source criticism on the Hexateuch, I am interested

Wellhausen's study of hermeneutic frictions not because I have any horse in the race of how we ought to understand the historical realities of biblical composition or redaction (whether we ought to favor a view of a few distinct documents or an infinite series of scribal layers), nor because this approach to textual problems is currently in vogue (it is not). Wellhausen provides a useful case study within the specific interests of this dissertation because it was this literary mode of source criticism in particular—the interpretive connection between textual divergences and unreliable narrators—that caused such a strong counter-reaction among later literary readers of scripture and the theologians who adopted their interpretive strategies.[30] These readers objected to the higher critical approach embodied in the work of scholars like Wellhausen who painted large portions of the Bible as errant, incoherent or in some respect inauthentic.[31] These later readers did not, however, submit alternative modes of integration for these incongruous elements. Instead, they rejected the consideration of the text's internal frictions altogether, favoring an interpretive framework grounded in the Bible's artistic coherence and literary unity. [32]

While I will not offer an exhaustive treatment of Wellhausen's biblical scholarship,[33] I hope to illustrate how Wellhausen attempted to work out the wider literary and theological implications of the textual frictions in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Beginning with his more familiar scholarship on the Hebrew Bible in the *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels,* I will look at the way that Wellhausen describes and situates what he takes to be the less reliable "judaising" source documents in relationship to the other literary strands of the Hexateuch. I will then examine similar reading strategies at play in Wellhausen's interpretation of the "ecclesiasticizing" tendencies of the

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in the ways that his engagements with these texts quite closely resemble his analysis of the relationships between the gospel accounts (a scholarly approach more traditionally termed "redaction criticism").

[30] The term "unreliable narrator" stems from the work of Wayne C. Booth, who writes: "I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not." On Booth's view, the unreliable narrator is set up as icon of dramatic irony who cant hear the story being told by the author to the reader behind the narrator's back. (Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 304).

[31] See for example David Jaspers' brief introduction to the work of David Friedrich Strauss in *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* in which he identifies Strauss with "what was later to be called *German Higher Criticism*" and calls this work "a hermeneutics of suspicion with a vengeance!" (David Jaspers, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004], 91).

[32] Of course, the suspicious posture of Wellhausen and his colleagues toward biblical narrators was not the sole cause of later readers' rejection of source criticism—readers also took issue with the un-acknowledged subjectivities of this exegetical science. As Baruch Halpern notes, "nineteenth century compositional analyses were hypothetical and subjective, occasioning fraction over specific texts; their historical implications were few. For this reason other fields, in which the identification of sources remains central, have jettisoned the attempt to carve up texts with surgical precision" (Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Bible and History* [University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984], 26).

[33] To say nothing of his broader scholarly interests, including his later work on early Arabic literature and history.

Gospel of John—tendencies that Wellhausen associates with the rituals and dogma of the Catholic tradition rather than idealized spirit of religion embodied in his own German Protestantism.[34] This comparison will help illuminate how the presence of literary and theological frictions within both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament was interpreted by Wellhausen as a hermeneutic directive toward the identification of the primary (and therefore more reliable) stratum[35] of the textual tradition, and conversely, by use of this primary, more "authentic" voice as an interpretive norm, the identification of less reliable and more distortive narrative voices.[36]

By examining Wellhausen's study of the frictions between biblical source materials, and his theorization of these frictions as the consequence of the canon's inclusion of unreliable narrators, I will clarify how a persistent, constitutive element of biblical literature (the preservation of diverse and even contradictory perspectives) came to be construed as an object of merely historical concern, with little bearing on the literary or theological meaning of these texts. Scholars like Wellhausen disseminated not only a rekindled awareness of the presence of hermeneutic frictions in biblical literature, but also deep and lasting associations between these frictions and a suspicions posture toward the human authorship of the Bible.[37] This incited a strong counter-reaction among the Bible's literary and theological readers that would lead them to not only to dismiss this approach to interpretation but also to relegate the textual incongruities it sought to address as matters of merely historical concern.

II. Popularizing the Hypothesis

Julius Wellhausen's reputation as the father of modern biblical scholarship was not earned by the originality of his scholarly proposals, nor was it secured by any intention of his own to disseminate his research to a broader audience. Rather, his scholarly legacy is largely attributable to his unusual facility as a writer. The seismic effect of his famed *Prolegomena zur Geschicte Israels* is largely

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[34] Particularly through Wellhausen's critical analysis of the fourth gospel in *Das Evangelium Johannis.* (Julius Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Johannis* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1908]).

[35] Starting in the nineteenth century, higher critics began to use the geological term "stratum"—which refers a layer or a series of layers of rock in the ground—to refer to the biblical text in terms of the various stages of its historical development.

[36] John Timmer, *Julius Wellhausen and the Synoptic Gospels: A Study in Tradition Growth* (Rotterdam: Bonder-off-set N.V., 1970), 43.

[37] As I mentioned in the previous chapter, attention to hermeneutic frictions within Biblical literature was not a new development in the modern period, but has a much longer history that extends back as far as the earliest Jewish and Christian commentary traditions, in the work of scholars like Augustine, Origen, or a variety of early Rabbinic commentators.

considered a consequence of the book's polished and accessible prose style[38] and literary merit, which, as Rudolf Smend writes, is "a rare exception among the works of German professors."[39]

Wellhausen's literary talents set him apart from his contemporaries not only in terms of the merits of his prose, but also his aptitude for clarifying the various literary strategies at work in the composition of Biblical literature. Reinhard Kratz writes,

> What was special about [Wellhausen] was neither the method nor the results of source criticism. Both had been prepared long before him. Rather, it was his eye for the individuality of the literary entities and the right instinct for the literary-historical process which characterize his analyses.[40]

With these literary skills in hand, Wellhausen gathered decades of obscure philological, historical, and text-critical research and wove this material into a coherent narrative that reconstructed Israelite history as a sequence of discrete stages in the way that Israel chose to remember and interpret her past. This retelling effectively demonstrated the wide-ranging implications of otherwise esoteric claims about biblical composition,[41] making Wellhausen a veritable icon in the history of biblical scholarship and a representative face for the higher critical approach.

Wellhausen published his first source critical project *Die Composition des Hexateuchs* in 1876,[42] but his iconic role in biblical scholarship was solidified with the expansion of these earlier insights in the much more popular *Prolegomena zur Geschicte Israels* in 1878.[43] In this second work—originally

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[38] Rudolf Smend writes, "Wellhausen presents and defends this thesis not just with wide-ranging evidence from throughout the Hebrew Bible but also with a superb literary style. Indeed Wellhausen's beautifully metaphoric prose is matched by no other biblical scholar...and few historians anywhere" (Robert A. Oden Jr., *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987], 21).

[39] Rudolf Smend, "Wellhausen and Prolegomena to the History of Israel," 12-13.

[40] Reinhard G. Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen's Method of Higher Criticism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 60 (2009): 387.

[41] Wellhausen published the work he is best known for—his *Prologomena to the History of Israel*—in 1878. Almost a century before, a German classicist by the name of Friedrich August Wolf had published his own pathbreaking *Prologomena to Homer*. Wellhausen's *Prologomena,* like Wolf's, took a non-conventional approach to textual history—one that had earned Wolf a nickname as the "Ishmael of criticism." Wolf's *Prolegomena* lent new life and energy to the study of classic Greek literature in the eighteenth century by showing the fruit of close philological research and text criticism on the interpretation of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Similarly, Wellhausen's non-apologetic history of Israel made text critical investigation into the composition and redaction of the Bible compelling, and brought popular attention, even if that attention was frequently negative—to the scholarly study of the bible (Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena ad Homerum sive De Operum Homericorum Prisca et Genuina Forma Variisque Mutationibus et Probabili Ratione Emendandi.* [Halis Saxonum: E. Libararia orphanotrophei, 1794-1795]).

[42] Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composiition des Hexteuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Reimer, 1889). Originally published as a series of articles in the *Jahrbuch für Deutsche Theologie.*

[43] The *Prolegomena* was first published as *Geschicte Israels*, *I* (Berlin, 1878) but was subsequently re-titled *Prolegomena zur Geschicte Israels* beginning with the publication of the second edition in 1883. The book was translated into English seven years later (in 1885) as *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh, 1885), but Wellhausen would not write the history of

intended to be the first of a two-volume history of Israel—Wellhausen established a foundation for re-narrating the gradual development of both biblical literature and Israelite religion by means of his creative adaptation of a theory that accounted for narrative tensions and legal discrepancies in the first books of the Bible—an approach known today as the "documentary hypothesis".

This dissertation is principally invested in the textual frictions that give birth to the documentary hypothesis and not in the admittedly contested scholarly terrain of the hypothesis itself.[44] However, in order to provide a thicker account of Wellhausen's attention to these hermeneutic frictions, as well as the contentious path he took to interpreting them—a path that caused later literary scholars to functionally disregard these frictions in their own reading of the Bible—it is necessary to offer a brief, prefatory summary of this approach to biblical composition.

The documentary hypothesis was developed over several centuries by biblical scholars of varied stripes, and made particular progress within German universities in the second half of the nineteenth century.[45] The hypothesis was a means of accounting for significant literary tensions in the first books of the Hebrew Bible by proposing the pre-existence of various independent literary strands. Hermeneutic difficulties (such as those discussed in the previous chapter in the narration of the Noah story) were explained by demonstrating that the frictive and occasionally incoherent "final form" of biblical narratives was a consequence of their composite character. On these terms, biblical stories played host to multiple separate, internally coherent versions of the same narrative that were later stitched together through a complex process of redaction, yielding the convoluted quality of the narratives' present form.

Biblical scholars who subscribe to the documentary hypothesis see general patterns between the various smaller pieces or layers of the composite text of the Pentateuch or Hexateuch.[46]

Israel that followed this prolegomena (*Israelitische und Jüdische Geschtticte)* until sixteen years after its original publication (Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Judische Geschicte* [Berlin, 1894]; Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 3)

[44] While the majority of contemporary biblical scholars would argue that a complex process of composition and redaction stands behind the texts we now read together as the Pentateuch—they remain divided on the nature of that composition and the process of redaction and compilation. For some scholars, the term "documentary" is a point of some controversy, because it implies pre-existent textual documents that are later redacted into the canonical text, when these traditions might have existed in oral rather than written form.

[45] Though some version of the documentary hypothesis had circulated for some time, known in prior centuries as the "fragmentary hypothesis" and promulgated as early as the seventeenth century in the work of scholars like Isaac La Peyere and Baruch Spinoza.

[46] This point about higher critical attention to patterns between the sources is of no small consequence to the discussion at hand. Though higher critics are often portrayed as being almost exclusively invested in the conflicted quality of biblical literature, their work on the integrity of the individual sources demonstrates their investment in a particular kind of literary unity. For further discussion on this topic, see Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 113.

From these patterns scholars have theorized the existence of (at least) four separate but internally coherent literary strands, composed of both narrative and legal materials and often stretching across multiple books.[47] According to this view, these more or less independent strands[48] were later combined by a number of editors or redactors to produce the final form of the Pentateuch (or as Wellhausen among others would insist, the Hexateuch—adding the book of Joshua to this literary body).[49] Scholars distinguished these strands (or "sources", as they came to be called) from one another based on significant variations in literary style, vocabulary, themes and/or theological perspectives, and labeled them the Jahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist and the Priestly source (later abbreviated in shorthand as "J", "E," "D" and "P," respectively).[50] Parsing out these sources from the convoluted literary wholes of which they were a part enabled these scholars to make sense of the various apparent contradictions in narrative or legal materials, not merely by acknowledging their presence within the biblical canon, but by allowing them to play an important role in determining *how* biblical literature ought to be read and interpreted.

Wellhausen's decision to repurpose the documentary hypothesis as a tool not simply for distinguishing between the Bible's divergent narratorial voices but for *interpreting* their divergences made a remarkable impact on the field of Biblical studies. This impact was so great, in fact, that the theory of textual composition Wellhausen adapted from the work of earlier scholars would later come to be known by his name as the Wellhausen hypothesis (or the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis), though some version of this theory had been in play for well over a century before his *Prolegomena*

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[47] It is generally assumed (though again, not without dispute), that the D source is, with a few minor exceptions, restricted to the book of Deuteronomy; the P source makes up the book of Leviticus, but stretches also into Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, and J and E materials run throughout Genesis, Exodus and Numbers. For a more thorough introduction to the character and substance of these various sources, see John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: The Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

[48] The independence of these sources is a subject of debate among source critics. Earlier critics tend to assume that the later documents build and expand upon the earlier ones while several contemporary source critics see things differently. Joel Baden, for example, argues persuasively that each of these sources were composed entirely independently from one another and this is what accounts for the fairly blatant contradictions between the sources in their narrative descriptions of the same event (See Joel S. Baden, *J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009]).

[49] Among other source critics, Wellhausen argues that the literary strands identified in the Pentateuch continue through the book of Joshua. Wellhausen writes, "The five Books of Moses and the Book of Joshua constitute one whole, the conquest of the Promised Land rather than the death of Moses forming the true conclusion of the patriarchal history, the exodus, and the wandering in the wilderness. From a literary point of view, accordingly, it is more accurate to speak of the Hexateuch than the Pentateuch" (Wellhausen, 6). Wellhausen is not consistent on this point, however, and continues to refer to this smaller canon as a Pentateuch throughout the *Prolegomena.*

[50] Classical scholarship tends to distinguish the sources based on style and terminology while more recent source critical work attempts to make distinctions between the sources based on distinctive sets of historical claims. For more on this see Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 246-249.

was published.[51]

In the *Prolegomena,* Wellhausen draws on the previously neglected scholarship of Karl Heinrich Graf (1815-1869).[52] Graf was one of a small minority of Biblical scholars working with the documentary hypothesis who took a different view of the chronological order of the four source documents.[53] He argued against what was then the working theory of source dating, claiming that the Priestly materials were not, in fact, the *Grundschift* or "primary document" of the Hexateuch, but instead were the *last* to be produced and amended to the other source documents, sometime after the Babylonian exile.[54]

Two of the larger, synthetic claims that Wellhausen made in his *Prolegomena* brought wide public attention to source criticism as well as Graf's own revisionist theory of source dating. First, Wellhausen clarified the significance of the documentary hypothesis for a broader audience by offering a series of compelling close readings of the inner-textual frictions between diverse narrations of the proper ordering of sacrificial rites, worship spaces, and sacred feasts. These close readings substantiated higher critical claims about literary problems in the final form of the biblical text, and made a strong case for the capacity of a theory like the documentary hypothesis to account for the divergent views of the narrative and legal tradition that have been preserved within the canon.

Second, Wellhausen popularized Graf's approach to source dating in particular by attaching Graf's theory about the relative lateness of the P source to a contentious conclusion about the wider significance of frictions between the P source and other materials for our understanding of the development of both Biblical literature and Israelite religion.[55] In Wellhausen's hands, this approach

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[51] Leslie Brisman writes, "The Wellhausen hypothesis was advanced less by the rigors of a scientific discipline than by the lure of a single, sweeping idea about the development of the text" (Leslie Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], x).

[52] Wellhausen was introduced to Graf's biblical scholarship and in particular Graf's *Die Geschictlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments* during his time at Göttingen by his professor Albrecht Ritschl. (Rudolf Smend, "The Work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen," 439).

[53] Including (but not limited to): Edouard Guillaume Eugene Reuss (Graf's teacher), Johann Friedrich Leopold George, Wilhelm Vatke and Abraham Kuenen.

[54] Karl Heinrich Graf, *Die geschictlichen Bucher des Altes Testament* (Leipzig: T.O. Weigel, 1866); Graf, "Die sogenannte Grundshift des Pentateuchs," in *Archiv fur wissenschtliche Erforschung des Alten Testaments,* ed. A Merx, (Halle, 1869), 466-77; See also Abraham Kuenen, *An Historico-Critical Inquiry in the Origin and Composition of the Hexateuch.* Translated by Philip H. Wicksteed. (London: Macmillan, 1886).

[55] Kuenen writes, "Wellhausen's treatment of our theme …was so cogent, so original, and so brilliant, that its publication may be regarded as the 'crowning fight' in the long campaign…those who dissent from it may appeal to names which command universal respect, but can no longer stake their case on the 'consensus criticorum' which has at

to source dating—locating the composition of the majority of the Hexateuch's legal material at a much later stage in the canon's development (what would later come to be known in shorthand as *lex post prophetas)* became a means of separating the development of Jewish[56] law and ritual (as represented by the cultic priorities of the P materials) from the substance of God's initial covenant and revelation (particularly strong in the J and E sources, though also visible to a diminished extent in D), and also for making the relative "lateness" of the P materials cause to consider its appropriation and redaction of prior materials suspect.[57]

While Wellhausen was certainly a competent source critic, his scholarly legacy was largely a consequence of these synthetic claims and of his creative re-deployment of the documentary hypothesis as a *literary* tool.[58] Traditionally, the study of tensions between the various source materials of the Hexateuch remained within scholarly debates about the history of biblical composition and redaction. But Wellhausen was frustrated by the narrow scope of these debates, and his contemporaries' endless, ineffectual attempts to "place the three legal and tradition strata in the Pentateuch in the right order"[59]—what he elsewhere terms a perpetual scuffling that "has no value as long as it confines itself to such mere generalities."[60] Against this circumscribed role for source critical inquiry, Wellhausen argued for a more expansive approach in the latter pages of the *Prolegomena,* explaining:

> Criticism has not done its work when it has completed the mechanical distribution [of the sources], it must aim further at bringing the different writings when thus arranged into relation with each other, must seek to render them intelligible as phases of a living process,

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last declared itself against them" (Abraham Kuenen, *An Historico-Critical Inquiry in the Origin and Composition of the Hexateuch,* trans. Philip H. Wicksteed [London: Macmillan and Co., 1886], xxxix-xl).

[56] The term "Jewish" is important here because Wellhausen makes a concerted effort to separate the terms "Israelite" and "Jewish"—identifying a continuity between the latter and modern day Judaism (in the ritualized religion that evolved in the wake of the exile), and a continuity between the former and a certain breed of individual, spontaneous Protestant Christianity.

[57] Here, it may be important to clarify that while Wellhausen's name has become synonymous with a form of source criticism that emphasizes four distinct literary works, Wellhausen rarely if ever separates out J from E materials over the course of the *Prolegomena*—claiming that they were combined by the hand of a redactor he calls the "Jehovist," and are now nearly impossible to parse apart. (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 12).

[58] Douglas Knight argues that Wellhausen's true talent was his ability to make Graf's hypothesis about the ordering of the sources seem probable by laying out a close reading of the tensions within the Hexateuch that would support a somewhat counter-intuitive reading that what seems to serve as the foundation of Israelite religion is actually the latest portion of this textual tradition: "[The *Prolegomena*'s] originality lies not so much in the details of the source division—for he drew heavily on his predecessor's in this regard—but more in the cogency with which the total argument is developed, especially with respect to the JEDP sequence of the documents" (Douglas A. Knight, "Wellhausen and the Interpretation of Israel's Literature," *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 22)

[59] Julius Wellhausen, Review of R. Hommel, *Die israelitische Überlieferung in inschriftlicher Beleuchtung,* cited in John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 23.

[60] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 12.

and thus to make it possible to trace a graduated development of the tradition.[61]

Though source critical analysis of the Pentateuch made steady progress within German Universities in the nineteenth century, Wellhausen was not satisfied with the fruits of these labors, insisting that "the work of synthesis did not hold even pace with [critical analysis]…indeed, the true scope of the problem was not realized."[62] Distinguishing between the source materials was not the end; nor was the establishment of plausible chronological arrangements of said materials. Rather, the chronology of the source materials must subsequently be *interpreted* so that the choices made in the adaptation of prior narrative and legal material might become a significant factor in biblical interpretation. "The problem we have set before us is not an imaginary one," Wellhausen insists, "but actual and urgent."[63]

Bringing the conflicting sources into relationship with one another and recognizing the dependence of later materials (P) on earlier materials (J & E, and also D), interpreters must raise critical questions about the nature of later authors' adaptations of prior material: do these redactions reveal a trustworthy narrator or one who seems to manipulate his or her source materials to some other end? In his own estimation, Wellhausen finds the priestly author(s) to be "unreliable" narrators. Though they try to "imitate the costume of the Mosaic period," in their speech and style, in the end, they do not offer an accurate representation of the religious life and practice of the Israelites during the time period they purport to describe. Instead, these writers provide insights, via their reconstructed biography of the nation, into the cultic priorities and revisionist agendas of a much later age.[64] Mediating the past through the lens of a new understanding of Israel's religious and political identity, the priestly narrators reimagine history—offering their readers a work of selective memory that forges deliberate, discriminating connections for its present audience to their distant past.

"It is the Priestly code, then," Wellhausen writes in the introduction to the *Prolegomena,* "that

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[61] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 295.
[62] Julius Wellhausen "Pentateuch," in *The New Werner Twentieth Century Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 18 (London: Werner Company, 1906), 519.
[63] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 6.
[64] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 9. As evidence for this claim, Wellhausen cites the fact that the Jehovist material presents itself as a simple book of history, concealing no distance from the past, often clarifying for its reader the different setting of these stories from the readers present situation ("the Canaanites were then in the land" (Genesis 36:31). The Priestly narrator, on the other hand, carefully avoids "all reference to later times and settled life in Canaan…it keeps itself carefully and strictly within the limits of the wilderness."

presents us with our problem"—a problem that extends far beyond the pages of the Hexateuch.[65] Wellhausen argues that we find similar frictions to those identified between the early and later strands of the Pentateuch throughout the Christian Bible: between the perspective of the divergent historical books and in the wider tensions that runs across the two testaments (between the sanctification of religious law and hierarchy, and a critique of the limits of that law and the proclamation of the gospel of freedom and spirit-led spontaneity). *This,* Wellhausen thinks, is the true scope of the literary problem we encounter throughout the biblical canon—a problem not foreign to the apostle Paul, or to John Chrysostom or Martin Luther—a problem that "ought to be solved by literary means through an inner comparison among the sources themselves."[66] Beginning with the Hebrew Bible, Wellhausen places different narrators side-by-side in their discussion of sacrifices, feast days, and the narratives of the patriarchs in order to draw out their divergent testimony. To address the significant literary and theological problems posed by the frictions that emerge between these witnesses, Wellhausen moves first to identify the religious agendas of variant strands and then to resolve this tension by determining which of these voices might be considered unreliable (reclaiming the remainder of the text as an authentic witness).

This mode of interpretation—seeing disagreements between biblical authors as due cause to determine more and less genuine material— was popularized earlier in the nineteenth century by members of the Tübingen school in their work on the New Testament.[67] Scholars like F.C. Baur and Albert Schwegler used a method they called *Tendenzkritik* to distinguish between competing reports of historical events or speeches given in the New Testament, marking some narrative descriptions as truer to the facts of history and others as influenced by an author's intention (*Tendenz*). These "intentions" were often painted as forms of propaganda—warped readings of historical facts geared toward some ideological end.[68]

Wellhausen followed the Tübingen school in his interpretation of the competing narrations of Israelite history canonized in the Hexateuch. He identified a set of calculated intentions in the divergent narrative material provided by Priestly narrators and framed these divergent narrations as a late, definitive break with old forms of thought, and an unreliable witness to the periods they

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[65] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 10.
[66] Julius Wellhausen, Review of R. Hommel, *Die israelitische Überlieferung in inschriftlicher Beleuchtung,* cited in John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 23. Italics mine.
[67] See C.F.D. Moule, "Some Observations on *Tendenzkritik*" in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. E. Bammel, C.F.D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 91-100; Douglas Knight, "Wellhausen and the Interpretation of Israel's Literature" *Semeia* 25 (1982): 27-28.
[68] Moule, "Some Observations on *Tendenzkritik,*" 91.

purport to describe. The Priestly narrator, in Wellhausen's view, manipulated the pre-existing tradition[69] presented by prior source materials so as to support the establishment of a new kind of coherent religious order in the wake of severe national trauma. This trauma forms the pivot point for the history of Israel and the history of biblical composition, marking off two distinct vantage points for the interpretation of the past: before or during the exile, and after the exile.

III. A Literary Tool as a Historical Tool

For Wellhausen, the Babylonian exile forms the crux of Israelite historiography—the dividing point between the divergently narrated versions of Israel's religious and political past that sit side-by-side in the Hebrew Bible. Wellhausen argued that the fall of the two kingdoms and the subsequent forced deportation of a large number of Judeans into a foreign land formed a "breach of historical continuity" for the Israelites "greater than which it is scarcely possible to conceive."[70] With the exile, Wellhausen argues, the Israelites become "the Jews," explaining, "Judaism comes into existence with the restoration after the Babylonian exile; the old Israel ceases with the destruction of Samaria."[71]

By some scholars' estimation, Wellhausen "discovered the exile," in that he "showed for the first time that it had decisively affected the nation's soul."[72] Of course, that is not exactly true.[73] Almost fifty years before the publication of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht DeWette made a similar argument about the decisive effect of Babylon on the Israelites.[74] But while

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[69] Wellhausen justifies his claim about the literary dependence of the Priestly writer on the other sources based on the small scale of editorial "violence" we encounter in the text, such that "the structure of each writing is left almost unimpaired" (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 296).

[70] Wellhausen, *Geschicte Israels,* 413, trans. Lou H. Silberman, "Wellhausen and Judaism," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 75-82, 77.

[71] Wellhausen writes, "Judaism comes into existence with the restoration after the Babylonian exile; the old Israel ceases with the destruction of Samaria—in between, there is a transition period lasting from the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans" (Julius Wellhausen, "Israelitisch-jüdische Religion," in *Die Kultur der Gegenwart,* Vol. 1, ed. P. Hinneberg [Berlin-Leipzig: Teubner, 1905], 1, quoted by Jan Christian Gertz in "Military Threat and the Concept of Exile in the Book of Amos" in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and Its Historical Contexts,* ed. Ehud Ben Zvi, Christoph Levin [Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2010], 13.

[72] John Barton, "Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel:* Influences and Effect" in *Text and Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible,* ed. Daniel Smith-Christopher (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 328.

[73] For a further discussion on the general distortion of Wellhausen's legacy on this point, and in particular the fact that he rather than de Wette is credited with identifying the exile as the break between "Israelite" and "Judaic" religion, see Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law and Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-35.

[74] DeWette argues that "The sojourn in a foreign land under a foreign people of a completely different outlook and religion, in addition to the impact the destruction of the state had upon the people, must have been of decided influence on their religion. The influence was so great that we must view the nation after the exile as a different one, with a different worldview and religion" (Lebrecht De Wette, *Biblische Dogmatik,* 52-53, quoted in Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, 4).

Wellhausen cannot exactly be credited with the discovery of the exile as a decisive, traumatic event in the religious life of the Israelites, he might still be responsible for the discovery of the exile as a decisive event within the history of biblical composition[75]—an event that would have substantive consequences for any books written in the wake of the exile on the framing and re-interpretation of Israel past. Wellhausen's conceit about the importance of the exile as a formative context for the composition of Israelite history proved to be a watershed for biblical scholarship, and contemporary biblical scholars tend to view the exile after Wellhausen as a "great influence on the development of theological thinking" and a period of intense literary activity.[76]

Wellhausen was not, however, a disinterested reader, and the picture he provides of the history of biblical composition is not simply an account of the relationships that obtain between competing biblical narrators given their distinct vantage points within the span of Israelite history. Instead, Wellhausen's interpretive schematic is based on his reading of the tensions between reliable and unreliable narrators, between reliable and unreliable images of true religion.[77] In Wellhausen's frame, reliable narrators (specifically the combined testimony of J and E) speak from a pre-exilic vantage point, representing the original content of revelation and Israelite faith characterized by local, spontaneous religious piety—continuous with what he identifies as "true Christianity."[78] These voices are followed by an intermediate narratorial stage (D) that bears witness to a slow shift in the religious thought and practices of the Israelite people. Finally, there are the late, unreliable narrators (P) that re-read the past from a post-exilic perspective, redacting images of the past with the later (unfortunate) institutionalized vision of the tradition that, by Wellhausen's estimation, stands in

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[75] For example, scholars now identify the exile with a shift not only in Biblical literature, but in Biblical Hebrew as well, terming the form of the language utilized in pre-exilic books "Classical Hebrew" and that which we find in post-exilic texts as "Later Hebrew" (William Schiedewind, "Writing in Exile," in *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 140).

[76] Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 237-8; For more on the centrality of the exile in Biblical literature, see: Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, *Enduring Exile: The Metaphorization of Exile in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Carolyn J. Sharp, "The Trope of 'Exile' and the Displacement of Old Testament Theology," *PRSt* 31 (2004): 153-69; William Schiedewind, "Writing in Exile," in *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139-164. For a counterpoint to this view of the centrality of the exile on both Israelite religion and Biblical composition see C.C. Torrey, "The Exile and Restoration," in *Ezra Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1910/1970) 285-340.

[77] The phrase "unreliable narrator" originates in the work of Wayne C. Booth. Booth uses this term in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in order to clarify the ways in which a narrator can be shown, either by an author or another narrator, to be, at some level, a "fallible" witness. There is a strong resemblance between the effect that Booth finds at work in novels by authors like Henry James and what Wellhausen identifies as emerging in the friction between adjacent sources in the biblical canon. (Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961]).

[78] Wellhausen writes, "The gospel develops the hidden impulses of the Old Testament, but it is a protest against the ruling tendency of Judaism" (Wellhausen, "Israel," 509).

close continuity with the religious structures and practices of Judaism.[79]

On one level, Wellhausen reads these later texts as signs of a historical departure from the original content of faith (what Wellhausen identifies as a predictable evolution toward institutionalized religion). But on another level, Wellhausen sees these priestly texts as themselves active agents in that departure, as key players in the transfiguration of Israelite religion. Priestly narrators offer the nation a new sense of her cultural and religious identity in the wake of the exile, and carefully knead that transfiguration back into the substance of tradition—redacting prior descriptions of spontaneous, local worship with the subtle inclusion of religious rites that would have been foreign to the patriarchs and prophets who appear to knowingly enact them.[80] Between these two modes of narration and these two distinct approaches to Israelite historiography, Wellhausen finds "all the difference that separates two wholly distinct worlds."[81]

IV. Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*

Wellhausen opens his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* with a provocative question that aims to make the difference between these two approaches to Israelite historiography as visible as possible, and to guide his analysis of the relationships between the Hexateuch's various narrators.[82] He begins:

> In the following pages, it is proposed to discuss the place in history of the 'law of Moses'" more precisely, the question to be considered is whether that law is the starting point for the history of ancient Israel, or not rather for that of Judaism; *i.e.* of the religious communion which survived the destruction of the nation by the Assyrians and Chaldeans.[83]

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[79] In Wellhausen's estimation, "Judaism" is a post-exilic invention, with "an entirely different physiognomy from that of Hebrew antiquity, so much so that it is hard to even catch a likeness" (Wellhausen, "Israel," 508-509).

[80] The critical slogan "*lex post prophetas*" is often associated with Wellhausen's project to clarify his understanding of the secondary nature of law in the Israel's history, though, as Stephen Chapman argues, "this phrase was likely more used by Wellhausen than about him." It is also important to recognize that for Wellhausen, this phrase refers to the historical precedence of the prophets, but not to the historical precedence of the prophetic books *as scripture* (which came later than the Torah). (Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000], 9).

[81] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 3.

[82] John H. Hayes points out that the question of the true historical place for the law of Moses is a central concern in the previously published histories of Henry Hart Milman and Heinrich Georg August Ewald, but their answers to this question, unlike Wellhausen's, differed from the standard accounts of Israelite history "only in degree and not in kind" (Hayes, "Wellhausen as a Historian," 41).

[83] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 1. Wellhausen waffles in this introduction on the true referent of the word "Law". At some points he will say "the Law, if by that word we understand the entire Pentateuch," but in other places he clarifies that the Law is strictly to be identified with "the Priestly code". Here, it seems clear that his question functions on two levels,

Here, Wellhausen's propaedeutic question—the *Prolegomena*—to the study of the "law of Moses" (which he uses here as a shorthand for the Hexateuch) is whether the texts that comprise that literary body are roughly contemporary with the foundational period they purport to describe, or whether they are actually creative re-narrations of that history from a much later period—re-narrations that serve the interests of sewing later religious innovations seamlessly into the authoritative fabric of scriptural tradition.[84]

Rather than starting his source critical investigation with a standard examination of the apparent contradictions that stand between adjacent sources redacted together in the Hexateuch, Wellhausen begins with an examination of these frictions in the presentation of Israel's history between the disparate narration of various books in the Hebrew Bible, because here "we are in the favourable position of starting with the objects of comparison distinctly defined,[85] instead of having to begin by a critical separation of the sources of various ages combined in one document."[86]

Wellhausen introduces his readers to the tension between disparate accounts of Israelite history in the Bible by pointing to "the alleged starting-point of Israel's history and that history itself."[87] That is, to reference his opening question, whether the law truly comes in the beginning, as the foundation of Israel. Wellhausen points to the fact that in some historical accounts there appears to be an early, immediate acceptance of divine law as soon as it is received from Sinai. In others, however, the early days of Israel are painted as a lawless chaos, only later followed by the gradual canonization and implementation of divine law.

As one example of these apparent textual incongruities, Wellhausen cites the book of Judges. There, the narrator offers an account of Israelite history that stands in stark contrast to the traditional image of the early legal foundations that first constituted and organized the Israelite nation—an image we find only pages before the opening of Judges in the book of Joshua. "The religious community set up on so broad a basis in the wilderness, with its sacred center and uniform organization, disappears and leaves no trace as soon as Israel settles in a land of its own,"

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corresponding to each of Wellhausen's two uses of the term "Law". Wellhausen wishes to clarify both the historical reality of that larger work called the "Law of Moses"—that is the Hexateuch—as well as that of the particular subset of that body of work most clearly identifiable with the "Law"—the Priestly source materials.

[84] Wellhausen clarifies that by "Judaism" he means the "the religious communion which survived the destruction of the nation by the Assyrians and the Chaldeans"—that is, the religious community formed among those who returned to Jerusalem after the exile. (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 1).

[85] That is, we are presented with entire books that we can take as more or less the work of a single period.

[86] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 171.

[87] Wellhausen, 5.

Wellhausen writes.[88] Though Judges is framed as taking place long after the reception and implementation of divine law in the Wilderness, the book offers a picture of widespread political disorder, where each and every citizen "did what was right in his own eyes."[89] This disorder moves slowly and only ever so slightly toward an organized system of government, with no mention whatsoever of any departure or "falling away" from a legal system they had previously received. Wellhausen writes:

> The period of Judges presents itself to us as a confused chaos, out of which order and coherence are gradually evolved under the pressure of external circumstances, but perfectly naturally and without the faintest reminiscence of a sacred unifying constitution that had formerly existed.[90]

Here, the rigid hierocracy that biblical chronology places long before the days of Judges is a foreign concept. Wellhausen encounters similar issues in his reading of the later royal histories found in the books of Samuel and Kings. While these books supposedly come long after the legal and ritual commandments are received by the Israelites in the desert, Wellhausen observes: "it would puzzle the very best intentions to beat up so many as two or three unambiguous allusions to the law."[91]

Later, however, in the histories composed in the wake of the Babylonian exile (such as the alternative account of Israelite history we find in the book of Chronicles), Wellhausen points out that "the Mosaism which until then had been only latent suddenly emerges into prominence everywhere" and the sanctuary, the priesthood and cultic ritual, once virtually absent, are "now the principal business of life."[92] Contrasting what he calls "the historical tradition" (that is, the histories as they are found in the books of Samuel or Kings)[93] to the Chronicler's creative "midrash" of these stories, Wellhausen writes, "the Book of Chronicles shows in what manner it was necessary to deal with the history of bygone times when it was assumed that the Mosaic hierarchy was their fundamental institution."[94] That is, as the past slowly becomes "invested with a certain nimbus of sanctity," later writers chose to "clothe it with the characters of legitimacy rather than sit in judgment upon it."[95] The Chronicler thus remembers the past with distinct advantages, re-narrating

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[88] Wellhausen, 5.
[89] Judges 21:25, translation mine.
[90] Wellhausen, 5.
[91] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 5.
[92] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 5.
[93] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 180
[94] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 6.
[95] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 6.

the tradition so as to commend forms of piety that would have been alien to the writers of Samuel and Kings and encourage respect for historical figures by whitewashing the seedier aspects of Israelite history. Wellhausen writes, "The alterations and additions of Chronicles are all traceable to the same fountainhead—the Judaizing of the past, in which otherwise the people of that day would have been unable to recognize their ideal."[96]

On the grounds of what he takes to be the express intention of the Chronicler's re-telling of Israelite history (that is, the further solidification of the priestly hierocracy), Wellhausen determines this material to be unreliable—more *midrash* than trustworthy history. Wellhausen explains:

> *Midrash* is the consequence of the conservation of all the relics of antiquity, a wholly peculiar artificial reawakening of dry bones, especially by literary means…like ivy it overspreads the dead trunk with extraneous life, blending old and new in strange combination. It is a high estimate of tradition that leads to its being thus modernized; but in the process it is twisted and perverted, and set off with foreign accretions in the most arbitrary way.

In other words, Wellhausen sees the Chronicler as utilizing the authority of tradition to make new religious innovations appear authoritative, and to commend the forms of piety that accord with those innovations to its audience. The Chronicler redesigns pre-existing narrative and legal material to support his own ideological ends—adding and rearranging narrative material in the biographies of Israel's Kings in order to draw clearer, straighter lines between Torah observance and divine favor.[97] Wellhausen writes: "With what show of justice can the Chronicler, after his statements have over and over again been shown to be incredible, be held at discretion to pass for an unimpeachable narrator?" Adding, "In those cases at least where its connection with his 'plan' is obvious, one ought surely to exercise some skepticism in regard to his testimony."[98]

In Wellhausen's view, Chronicles was not exceptional with regards to its strong ideological agenda. Nor does it stand alone in its overall narratorial impeachability within the biblical canon. Instead, Wellhausen sees this book as a member of a larger class of texts composed in later years after the return from Babylon that share a common vision for the reconstitution and redaction of

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[96] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 223.

[97] See, for example, the differences between the biography of King Asa of Judah as described in 1 Kings 15, and as recounted in 2 Chronicles 14. In 1 Kings, Asa is described in mixed terms, neither as a purely good King, nor a wicked one. When the Chronicler recounts this story, however, the narrative of Asa's life more than triples in size, and the additional material serves to redact some of the more problematic aspects of Asa's biography (relocating his failure to remove the high places out of his own Kingdom into the North), making for a cleaner causal relationship between Asa's faithfulness and the Lord's blessing, between Asa's waywardness and divine retribution.

[98] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 224.

Israel's history. Wellhausen writes "Chronicles owes its origin, not to the arbitrary caprice of an individual, but to a general tendency of its period."[99] "The mere difference of date," Wellhausen argues, between those books written before the exile and those composed afterward, "accounts for the varying ways in which the two histories represent the same facts and events, and the difference of spirit arises from the influence of the Priestly Code."[100] Thus Wellhausen aligns the unreliability of the Chronicler to that of the composer of the Priestly materials—locating the composition of both in the period after the exile "out of the very midst of fully developed Judaism."[101]

Just as Chronicles offers a second parallel history to the material covered by the books of Samuel and Kings, adapting old material to new ends, so Wellhausen understands the Priestly Code which "runs, as to its historical thread, quite parallel to the Jehovist history."[102] Wellhausen argues that the Priestly material, like Chronicles, has a strong literary dependence on pre-existence source texts. In fact, Wellhausen understands the final redaction of these pre-existent source texts together with the new material to be largely the product of some Priestly editor. He explains:

> From the mouth of the people there comes nothing but the detached narratives, which may or may not happen to have some bearing on each other: to weave them together in a connected whole is the work of the poetical or literary artist. Thus the agreement of the sources in the plan of the narrative is not a matter of course, but a matter requiring explanation, and only to be explained on the ground of the literary dependence of one source on another.[103]

The final material—the priestly source—weaves the historiography of these various literary ages together so as to comment and at times specifically protest the content of previous traditions materials while at the same time paying lip service to their authority.

Wellhausen begins his textual analysis of the Hexateuch by considering inner-canonical conflicts between the ways religious ordinances are variously narrated.[104] While in earlier materials "the cultus was spontaneous," in the later priestly writers' depiction of the feast days, sacrifices, and

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[99] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 224.
[100] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 171.
[101] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 171.
[102] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 295.
[103] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 296.
[104] Wellhausen considered this first example to be the prime exemplar of his wider project. He writes later on in the *Prolegomena:* "My whole position is contained in my first chapter, there I have placed in a clear light that which is of such importance for Israelite history, namely, the part taken by the prophetical party in the great metamorphosis of the worship, which by no means came about of itself" (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 368).

places of worship, the cultus becomes "a thing of statute."[105] In earlier times, feasts and festivals were natural occasions, arising spontaneously in accordance with agricultural rhythms: in gratitude for seasons and harvests.[106] The feast of in-gathering (*asiph*) and that of booths (*sukkoth*), for example, both commanded in Exodus 34, evolve from natural occasions, as a celebration of the end of harvest.[107]

In the writings of the Priestly narrators, however, feast days are fixed in the calendar (determined by the cycles of the moon)[108] and centralized in the Temple, forfeiting all relationship to the particular places, communities, and times from which they evolved. Wellhausen writes, "by the monotonous sameness of the unvarying burnt offering and sin-offering of the community as a whole [the feasts] are all put on the same even level, deprived of their natural spontaneity and degraded into mere 'exercises of religion'."[109] While "the act of salvation whereby Israel was founded issues in the gift of a fruitful land," here it is centralized far away from the fields and the actual material labors from which it once naturally evolved.[110]

This transfiguration of religious ordinances emerges not only in the Priestly narrator's authorship of the festal cycle sequences in Leviticus and Numbers, but also in this narrator's redaction of Israelite history.[111] As one example, Wellhausen cites the denaturalization of the Passover feast. While once a natural commemoration of gratitude to God for sparing the firstborn of Israel, Wellhausen argues that this feast was transfigured in the redaction of Exodus so that the celebration of the feast itself *causes* this gracious act of God—"much more than a commemoration of a divine act of salvation, it is itself a saving deed."[112]

Wellhausen turns from his discussion of divergences between ritual material to similar tensions in Hexateuchal narratives, beginning with the apparent frictions between the two distinct creation accounts at the beginning of Genesis. He writes,

> In Genesis 2 and 3, man is virtually forbidden to lift the veil of things, and to know the world, represented in the tree of knowledge. In Genesis 1, this is the task set him from the beginning; he is to rule over the whole earth, and rule and knowledge come to the same

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[105] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 78.
[106] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 91, 111.
[107] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 84-85.
[108] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 101.
[109] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 100.
[110] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 92.
[111] Leviticus 23, Numbers 28, 29.
[112] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 102.

> thing—they mean civilization. There nature is to him a sacred mystery: here it is a mere fact, an object; he is no longer bewildered over against nature, but free and superior. There it is a robbery for man to seek to be equal with God: here God makes him at first in His own image and after His own likeness, and appoints him His representative in the realm of nature. We cannot regard it as fortuitous that in this point Gen I asserts the opposite of Gen 2, 3; the words spoken with such emphasis and repeated…sound exactly like a protest against the view underlying Gen 2, 3, a protest to be explained partly by the growth of moral and religious cultivation, but partly also no doubt due to the convulsive efforts of later Judaism to deny the most firmly established of all the lessons of history, that the sons suffer for the sins of the Fathers.[113]

To Wellhausen, the friction between these two creation narratives is not hermeneutically productive. Rather, these frictions are signs of an irresolvable conflict between two competing visions of "God, nature and man."[114] "The Jehovist narrative does shine by the absence of all efforts after rationalistic explanation, by its contempt for every kind of cosmological speculation," Wellhausen writes.[115] The Jehovist paints God in mythical terms, marveling at this divine being who works in a human way: molding and planting and breathing his creatures into being. The Priestly account, on the other hand, is a "systematic construction"—aiming primarily at explanation and not at wonder.[116] The Priestly author employs the word ברא (*bārā*) for God's creative work, dissociating God's action from every art of human artifice.[117] "In a youthful people such a theological abstraction is unheard of," Wellhausen argues, "and so with the Hebrews we find both the word and the notion only coming into use after the Babylonian exile."[118] The Jehovist speaks of rivers he has seen and walked in—of the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile—and of myths he has heard on those same rivers. The Jehovist, Wellhausen argues, gives us wonder—wonder at man, creation, at the strange movement of God.

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[113] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 307.
[114] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 307.
[115] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 303. Betraying his clear preference for the Jehovist's lack of attempts for rational explanation, Wellhausen writes: "The idea explains matter: mechanical possibility is never consulted, and we do not think of asking about it. Want of taste could find no lower deeps than when this or that scholar goes from Genesis 2:21 to count his ribs, or comes to the conclusion that the first man was hermaphrodite" (Wellhausen, 304).
[116] Strangely enough, Wellhausen levies a critique here at the conventional reading of the two creation stories that uses the "naturalness" of Genesis 1 as a way to establish its primacy—a critique that could just as easily be addressed to the patterns of reading that dominate this text, and Wellhausen's own preference for the natural. Speaking of the perspective of Genesis 1, he writes, "To our way of thinking its views are more intelligible, simpler, more natural, and on this account they have been held to be also older. But this is on the one hand to identify naturalness with originality, two things which everyone knows not to be the same" (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 307-308).
[117] The Jehovist author uses verbs more often employed by human craftsmen—God *molds* and *fashions* creatures from clay and dirt and not, as implied in Genesis 1, from some primordial chaos, or as some readers prefer to read it: *ex nihilo.*
[118] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 305.

The Priestly narrator colors over this wonder with order—with an etiology of the proper and divinely appointed arrangement of all things, and the rituals that ensure this arrangement's stability.

It should be clear by now that Wellhausen's determination of the Priestly narrator as an unreliable witness comes not simply as a product of this narrator's later position in history. Rather, Wellhausen has some serious objections to the Priestly author's vision of religious life and practice. When he speaks of the Priestly narrator's depiction of sacrificial rites, for example, Wellhausen writes:

> The warm pulse of life no longer throbbed in it to animate it, it was no longer the blossom and the fruit of every branch of life, it had its own meaning all to itself. It symbolized worship, and that was enough. The soul was fled; the shell remained, upon the shaping out of which every energy was now concentrated. A manifoldness of rites took the place of individualizing occasions; technique was the main thing, and strictly fidelity to rubric.[119]

Here and across the *Prolegomena,* we can see traces of a certain romanticization of primitive man, and of the purity of primitive religion—an idea we see prominently in the poetry of William Blake. In fact, Wellhausen's reading of the contests between reliable and unreliable narrators in the Hebrew Bible might well be summed by a similar meditation on the eleventh plate of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:*

> The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.
> And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country, placing it under its mental deity;
> Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood;
> Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.[120]
> And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such things.
> Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.

Wellhausen, like Blake, imagines the Priesthood to be a distortion and denaturalization of original revelation and human insight—one that has so thoroughly kneaded itself throughout the tradition that it is a "wide and difficult" task to strain it out. "The law comes in and leavens the Jehovistic narrative," Wellhausen writes, "under the influence of the legislation of a post-exile restoration,

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[119] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 78.
[120] William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Plate II.

there is brought about a complete metamorphosis of the tradition."[121] Wellhausen likens this metamorphosis to the production of lumber from once living forests: "it may be likened to the green tree which grows out of the ground as it will and can," he writes, "at a later time it is dry wood that is cut and made to a pattern with compass and square.[122]

Wellhausen's decision to integrate the Hebrew Bible on these terms—by naming the narrator that emphasizes religious law, temple ritual and priestly order as "unreliable"—has long been interpreted by Jewish readers as in line with a supersessionist, or even anti-Semitic interpretive agenda. Lou Silberman writes, "The evidence drawn from the *Prolegomena* calls for the conclusion that it, like practically everything written by German Protestant theologians of the period and many subsequently to this day, is a work of anti-Judaism."[123]

Silberman's critique is not without merit. Indeed, Wellhausen's discussion of Judaism and his representation of the law betrays a form of prejudice far deeper than a simple Pauline or Lutheran antinomianism.[124] These prejudices become abundantly clear in Wellhausen's contribution to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* under the entry "Israel":

> Judaism is everywhere historically comprehensible, and yet it is a mass of antimonies. We are struck with the free flight of thought and the deep inwardness of feeling which are found in some passages in the Wisdom and in the Psalms; but, on the other hand, we meet with a pedantic asceticism which is far from lovely, and with pious wishes the greediness of which is ill-concealed; and these unedifying features are the dominant ones of the system. Monotheism is worked out to its furthest consequences, and at the same time is enlisted in the service of the narrowed selfishness…the creator of heaven and earth becomes a manager of a petty scheme of salvation; *the living God descends from His throne to make way for the law*.[125]

The law, as Wellhausen framed it, stood as a direct impediment to the freedom of the gospel. "It regulates and sets limits to the understanding of the divine working on the earth," he writes, "as far

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[121] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 361.
[122] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 361.
[123] Lou H. Silberman, "Wellhausen and Judaism," *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 75-82.
[124] However, it is also the case that identifying a work of this period as "anti-Semitic" is not all that surprising. Daniel Weidner notes that while Wellhausen's reading of the Old Testament is "severely biased, motivated by a deep suspicion (if not outright hostility) toward the law" still, "the result of his reading differs radically from his equally supersessionist 'Old Testament Theology' precursors, a difference that highlights that ideological criticism of different readings as anti-Judaic can paint with too broad brushstrokes and thereby fail to explain the specific discursive structure of these readings, much less their influence on later writers" (Daniel Weidner, "The Political Theology of Ethical Monotheism" in *Judaism, Liberalism and Political Theology* ed. Randi Rashkover and Martin Kavka [Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013], 185).
[125] Wellhausen, "Israel," in *Prolegomena,* 509.

as it can it takes the soul out of religion and spoils morality."[126] Wellhausen attempted to give his readers a sacred text more in line with their own tastes for the religious life, removing the offending legal materials and peculiar ritual sacrifices from the biblical canon. As Silberman writes, "Judaism could continue to be for the liberal Protestants the dark background against which the incandescence of the religion of Jesus could ever more brightly shine, once it had been purged of the dross of dogma."[127]

While Wellhausen is certainly best known for the developmental account of Israelite religion he lays out in the *Prolegomena*, his extensive scholarship on both the gospels and the epistles in the New Testament is often overlooked. In this later body of largely un-translated work,[128] Wellhausen offers a strikingly similar reading of discrepancies between the gospel narratives as evidence of the gradual (and in Wellhausen's opinion, unfortunate) development of institutionalized Christianity.[129] Attention to his comparative analysis of the gospel narratives makes it clear that his identification of the devolutionary movement "from the free to the fixed, from the simple to the formal, from the natural to the ceremonial and institutional" is evident not only in Wellhausen's analysis of hermeneutic frictions within the Hebrew Bible, but in his critical scholarship of the New Testament, as well.[130]

V. Wellhausen's Theory of the Gospels

Wellhausen's writings on the New Testament—specifically his comparative analysis of the four gospels—complicate the strictly supersessionist or anti-Semitic reading of his biblical scholarship typically derived from his famed devolutionary account of Israelite religion. That is not to say that there is no substance to the well-attested claim that Wellhausen's hermeneutic framework

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126 Wellhausen, "Israel," in *Prolegomena,* 509.
127 Silberman, "Wellhausen and Judaism," 79.
128 The fact that the majority of Wellhausen's New Testament scholarship was never translated into English is likely due to the fact that Wellhausen's work on the Pauline letters and the gospels was not nearly as controversial, nor as influential, as his work on the Hebrew Bible.
129 While Wellhausen had previously published smaller studies of the Aramaic gospels and the eschatological vision of the writers of the New Testament, the majority of his work on the gospels falls between 1903 and 1914. (Allen Wikgren, "Wellhausen on the Synoptic Gospels: A Centenary Appraisal," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 12 [1944]: 174-180).
130 Patrick Miller, "Wellhausen and the History of Israel's Religion," *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 62. It is important to recognize Wellhausen's treatment of the sources of the Hexateuch as a *devolutionary* scheme, a fall away from an initial, pure insight, rather than a "Hegelian" progression toward ever improving levels of consciousness, though this misreading of Wellhausen's work is fairly common. While Wellhausen does think of history in terms of "stages" and progression—he does not think of it strictly as *progress*. Rather, subsequent stages represent an unfortunate departure from earlier insights, not a synthesis or positive advance. (John Barton, "Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 171-3).

relies upon a basic prejudice against both Judaism and the law. However, juxtaposing his reading of antagonisms between the sources of the Hexateuch to his comparative analysis of conflicts between the gospels, we can see a broader anti-clericalism[131] or anti-institutionalism that stretches across his work, as well as a broader and more general suspicion toward the element of human *poesis* in the interpretation of divine revelation.[132]

In the wake of Wellhausen's resignation from the theology faculty at the University of Griefswald,[133] he would take up several different posts in Oriental languages and philology[134] before finally settling into the philosophical faculty at the University of Göttingen.[135] It was there he began his scholarly work on the New Testament with a Semitic history of the Greek language used in the gospels. Later, he turned to the content of these texts, writing commentaries on the three synoptic gospels and a critical analysis of the Gospel of John.[136]

Biblical scholar Nils Dahl writes, "it would be onesided, but not really inappropriate to regard Wellhausen's New Testament studies as a kind of "prolegomena" to a history of Jesus and early Christianity which Wellhausen never wrote."[137] Similar to his reading of the Hebrew Bible in which the oldest materials are the most trustworthy, and newer adaptations are conversely suspect, Wellhausen identifies the earliest gospel (Mark) as the most genuine, historical material we have about the life of Jesus, opposing Mark's testimony to the later compositions of Matthew and Luke and especially to the much later composition of the gospel of John, in which the life and teachings

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131 Douglas Knight writes, "At the very base of Wellhausen's opinion about such 'distortions' of past history was his own anti-institutional posture, which turned him against the post-exilic intentions—as he identified them—and drew him to the free spirit which he saw at play in the early period" (Knight, "Wellhausen and the Interpretation of Israel's Literature," 33).

132 R.G. Kratz writes that if there is a common thread between Wellhausen's criticism of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and Arabic literature, "it is the development of, or more properly the opposition between, the original beginnings of a religion or culture which grew up naturally and are still completely earthly and the later stage, in which things have assumed an institutionally established, artificial and dogmatic state" (R.G. Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen's Method of Higher Criticism" *Journal of Theological Studies* 60 [2009]: 383.).

133 While Wellhausen's reasons for leaving the University of Griefswald are widely understood in terms of the rationale Wellhausen submitted to the minister of education, claiming, "Es ist mir erst allmählich aufgegangen, dass ein Professor der Theologie zugleich die praktische Aufgabe hat, die Studenten für den Dienst in der evangelischen Kirche vorzubereiten, und das ich dieser praktischen Aufgabe nicht genüge" (Quoted by John Timmer, *Julius Wellhausen and the Synoptic Gospels,* 16). However, in recent years , scholars have questioned whether or not this is the primary reason Wellhausen left his post at Griefswald, wondering if he may have primarily been interested in looking for Universities that would provide more opportunities for research and scholarly development. See Albert Jepsen, "Wellhausen in Greifswald: Ein Beitrag zur Biographie Julius Wellhausen," in *Der Herr is Gott: Aufsätze zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978), 254-270.

134 Wellhausen taught at Halle from 1882-1885, at Marburg from 1885-1891, before finally landing at Göttingen in 1891.

135 William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 151.

136 Nils A. Dahl, "Wellhausen on the New Testament," in *Semeia* 25 (1982): 89-110, 90-91.

137 Nils A. Dahl, "Wellhausen on the New Testament," 95.

of Jesus have become, in his estimation, thoroughly warped and "Christianized."[138]

Wellhausen's criterion for evaluating the authenticity of the gospel materials is based on their relative freedom from the influence of early Christian teachings: the identification of Jesus as the messiah, or as the founder and head of the Christian church. While Matthew and Luke each take certain interpretive liberties in their respective gospels, in Wellhausen's eyes no one takes creative freedoms so liberally as John. Though admitting that the anonymous writer of this fourth gospel may offer his readers a basically correct chronology of the life of Jesus, Wellhausen argues that John's testimony has been irreparably tainted by his own ecclesial agenda. In his critical companion to the Gospel of John, *Das Evangelium Johannis,* Wellhausen offers a brief synopsis of his take on the relationship of John to the other gospels, explaining: "In Mark, the gospel is restricted to the introduction of the Passion. In Matthew and Luke, it has continued to spread. In John, it has not only penetrated the tradition but overwhelmed it."[139]

Wellhausen identifies the narrator of John's gospel as an unreliable witness to the events of the life of Jesus on similar terms to his condemnation of the Priestly narrator. John has similarly allowed the religious ideas of a later period—in this case, early Christianity—to overly interpret his subject matter. In John's gospel, "the earthly Jesus is merged completely and from the beginning into the heavenly Jesus," Wellhausen writes, such that the biography of Jesus is made to serve doctrinal ends for the edification and stabilization of the church.[140]

It is this concept—writing in the service of the church—that provides the key connective tissue between Wellhausen's criticism of the unreliability of the Priestly narrator(s) and the author of John's gospel. Just as Wellhausen lamented what he saw as the warped picture of Israelite religion provided by the Priestly narrator in which "the manifoldness of rites took the place of individualizing occasions" so too he finds the Gospel of John far too "church oriented, not individualistic."[141] Indeed, Wellhausen takes issue not only with the act of writing toward the interests of the church or synagogue—but with what he takes to be outdated political institutions with no permanent relationship to the revelation that provided the seed of each community. While

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[138] Dahl, "Wellhausen on the New Testament," 96.
[139] Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Johannis* (Berlin: G. Reimer: 1908), 121, translation mine. "Bei Markus ist das Evangelium auf die Einleitung zur Passion beschränkt. Bei Matthäus und Lukas hat es weiter sich gegrifften. Bei Johannes hat es die Überlieferung nicht bloss durchdrungen, sondern überwaltigt."
[140] Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Johannis*, 121, translation mine. "Der irdische Jesus ist völlig und von allem Anfang an, in dem himmlischen aufgegangen."
[141] Dahl, 97.

the "ecclesial community" of both early Judaism and early Christianity emerged in opposition to state power, Wellhausen writes that it is now possible (at least for Christians) to find a natural home in their nation, and so break with the once subversive but now irrelevant affiliation with the church. He explains:

> Jesus was so full of new and positive ideas that He did not feel any need for breaking old idols, so free that no constraint could depress Him…The Church is not his work, but an inheritance from Judaism to Christianity. Under Persian domination the Jews built up an un-political community on the basis of religion. The Christians found themselves in a position with regard to the Roman Empire precisely similar to that which the Jews had occupied with regard to the Persian; and so they also founded, after the Jewish pattern, in the midst of the state which was foreign and hostile to them, and in which they could not feel themselves at home, a religious community as their true fatherland. The state was always the presupposition of the Church; but it was at first, in the case of both the Jewish and Christian church, a foreign state. The original meaning of the Church thus disappeared when it no longer stood over against the heathen world-power, it having become possible for the Christians also to possess a natural fatherland in the nation.[142]

Here we see a much broader anti-clericalism at play. Wellhausen explains the church (and the institutionalized forms of faith that accompany it) as a political structure that is no longer relevant in the modern world—in an age when Christian faith is now the official religion of the state. Thus Wellhausen's literary analysis of the relationship between competing narrators has a consistent bent away from later texts that emphasize institutional religion in the form of the temple, synagogue, or church, and back toward the original "Geist" or spirit of faith that would find a natural home in the modern state.

Wellhausen interprets textual incongruities in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament along the lines of what Baruch Halpern identifies as a "negative fundamentalism" among biblical interpreters who read texts according to their prior belief that "scribes lie, historians invent," and large portions of the text can be seen as a "pious fraud."[143] What is deemed as a fraudulent or unreliable witness, however, is consistently whatever corresponds with the view of religious faith Wellhausen finds least appealing. Halpern writes,

> [Wellhausen] insisted on the inaccuracy, maliciously construed, of all late sources…the secretion of

[142] Wellhausen, "Israel," 512.
[143] Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History,* 27.

> this venom was the conviction that compositional analysis enabled the critic to strip away and discard 'lifeless' Jewish 'accretions' to 'warm,' 'sympathetic' Israelite tradition. The drift of this program was as much anti-Catholic as anti-Semitic: from the Protestant perspective, the object of exegesis was to constitute oneself the New Israel and to tar the Roman Church as the new Judaism."[144]

Thus Wellhausen's critique of the institutional investments of the Priestly narrator can be read in terms of his own anti-Catholic sentiments, as well as the aim of many German Protestants of this time to align their own forms of worship with the original insights of true religion.

VII. Conclusion

While Wellhausen's scholarship proves a valiant attempt to form a plausible determination of the chronological relationships that obtain between the various narrators of biblical literature[145] (both in relationship with each other and with events in the history of Israel that might have subsequently informed their creative re-interpretation of past events), his particular approach to this interpretive task bears a stronger resemblance to critical readings of the convoluted narrative patterns in a novel like William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* than any standard historiographic enterprise.[146]

In fact, we might see in Wellhausen's oft-disparaged move to look "behind" testimony of biblical narrators something akin to the interpretive task Eudora Welty identified in her students' attempts to read and understand Faulkner's fiction. Perusing a well-marked classroom copy of *The Sound and the Fury,* Welty discovered one student's efforts, by means of detailed marginalia, to clarify

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[144] Halpern, 27. Reinhard Kratz similarly argues, "If we survey the whole of Wellhausen's work, we come upon a pattern of interpretation which is there from the beginning and keeps recurring in all three spheres of Old Testament, Arabic, and New Testament studies. It is the development of, or more properly the opposition between, the original beginnings of a religion or culture which grew up naturally and are still completely earthy, and the later stage, in which things have assumed an institutionally established, artificial, and dogmatic state" (Reinhard G. Kratz, "*Historia Sacra* and Historical Criticism in Biblical Scholarship" in *History and Religion: Narrating a Religious Past,* ed. Bernd-Christian Otto, Susanne Rau [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015], 409).

[145] Wellhausen use of the term "narrator" might be attributed to his major influences, Georg Heinrich August Ewald, who describes the authors of the various sources as "narrators" in his own *History of Israel*, though Ewald is much more confident that biblical narrators are "reliable sources," given the "universal tendency" of the text to "plain truth and divine earnestness." At one point Ewald writes that "When one reflects…that the higher a narrator soared the more he was compelled to let his own personality disappear behind the grand Divine story he had to tell, it cannot be a matter of surprise to us that the names even of the greatest historians of the Old Testament have been lost to us" (Georg Heinrich August Ewald, *History of Israel* I, ed. R. Martineau [London: Longman & Green, 1876-1886], 55, 87; quoted by Jean Louis Ska, "The 'History of Israel': Its Emergence as an Independent Discipline" in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* III/1, 334).

[146] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1929).

the convoluted witness of the novel's four narrators by juxtaposing each sequenced version of dates and events in parallel timelines. Noting this ambitious student's defeat at perfectly synthesizing the testimony of the various narrators, Welty observed that the student still got something right: "If a point is reached in fiction where chronology has to be torn down, it must be in order to admit and make room for what matters overwhelmingly more to the human beings who are its characters."[147] By deconstructing the convoluted chronology offered by the conflicting testimony of multiple narrators in a text like *The Sound and the Fury*, a reader is able to identify the ways in which time itself constitutes the "living essence" of that text. "We read not in spite of the eccentric handling of time," Welty argues, "but as well as we can by aid of it."[148]

In Wellhausen, the reconstruction of the chronology of the Bible's composition serves as a means of foregrounding not time *per se*, but interpretation—the hermeneutic dimension of every human construction of history. Wellhausen uses the documentary hypothesis so as to highlight the disparate vision of biblical authors and to make that disparate quality of their witness a key element in the interpretation of biblical literature.

But in his move to integrate incongruous textual elements by eliminating those elements as "unreliable" that do not accord with his own overarching vision of true religion, Wellhausen performs the kind of analysis literary theorist Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading": finding a fox in every henhouse and an unreliable narrator behind each and every narrative tension or plot anomaly.[149] There are, after all, alternative "modes of integration"[150] in the interpretation of textual incongruities that may be preferable to the identification of unreliable narrators in that these alternative modes do not necessitate evaluative judgments between narrative voices or the implicit devaluation of certain characters' testimony.[151] A given narrator can be perceived as reliable or unreliable to various extents, or to various interpretive ends within a novel, and this narrator may appear differently reliable to different readers, depending on the normative frameworks this reader

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147 Eudora Welty, "On Faulknerian Time," in *On William Faulkner* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 59.
148 Welty, 59.
149 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Normativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
150 The phrase "modes of integration" comes from the work of Meir Sternberg, who uses it to describe a reader's efforts to create coherent pictures of characters, themes and plots as they move through a novel, so that they know how to form expectations and when to be surprised (Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978], 169).
151 Many critics, for example, objected to the moralistic vision of Wayne C. Booth's reading of the novel *Lolita,* and his insistence that the narrator stands at an ironic remove from the views of the author. (James Phelan, "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability and the Ethics of *Lolita,"* in *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, ed. Elke D'hoker, Gunther Martens [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008], 8).

brings to or observes in the text.[152] Unreliability, in short, is not the only interpretive hypothesis appropriate to signs of textual tension.

Wellhausen's approach to interpreting the implications of these frictions—seeing them as evidence of separate authorial "personalities" and seeing these distinct personalities as due cause to adjudicate between more and less reliable biblical narrators—has been situated as the critical "antagonist" to proper reading of this text as a literary or canonical whole. But this interpretive strategy is not unique to Wellhausen. In fact, it is actually part of a much longer tradition in the history of biblical scholarship that extends back to the first centuries of biblical interpretation.[153]

We see this impulse in the second century writings of Marcion, for example, who saw conflicting representations of the character God in Biblical literature as representative of two separate authorial identities: one trustworthy "Christian" witness and another corrupted "Jewish" editorial gloss. More recently, literary critic Harold Bloom makes a similar argument for distinguishing between narratorial personalities.[154] Bloom marks off more the conventional "normativizing" Pentateuchal narrators from the author of the source materials identified with the "J" writer, whom Bloom speculates must have been a woman, a member of the Solomonic elite and a veritable genius (not at all unlike Wellhausen's own shorthand for the Priestly and Jehovist narrators as the "systematizer" and the "genius," respectively).[155]

What is so peculiar about Wellhausen's legacy, then, is not the particulars of his approach to textual incongruities. Instead, it is the fact that beneath literary and theological readers' loud disagreements with Wellhausen's methods and aims, there appears to be a tacit shared understanding about the singular way that textual incongruities can be interpreted. That is, in response to Wellhausen's interpretation of textual incongruities as signs that biblical literature and the divine revelation contained therein may have become warped and desecrated in human hands, literary and theological readers yielded. These readers dismissed not only the gravity of Wellhausen's conclusions, but of his data as well, surrendering these textual elements completely to historical inquiry and forfeiting the opportunity to consider alternative modes of integration. It is to these

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[152] See Tamar Yacobi, "Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator's (Un)Reliability," in *Narrative* 9 (2001): 223-229.

[153] Marcion's writings, including his famed *Antitheses* have been lost to history, though extensive quotations are preserved both by his followers and by those who opposed him (notably Iraneus' *Adversus Haereses* and Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem*).

[154] Harold Bloom, *The Book of J,* trans. David Rosenberg (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

[155] Bloom, *The Book of J*, 23; Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 307-8.

literary and theological readers that I now turn, considering how their reaction to higher critical scholarship subtly surrendered textual incongruities as objects of mere "historical" interest.

Chapter Three | *The Literary Bible: Defending Coherence at the Turn of the Century*

The revelation which is the basis of our modern religion has been made in the form of literature: grasp of its literary structure is the true starting-point for spiritual interpretation.[1]

RICHARD G. MOULTON

No principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole. [2]

RICHARD G. MOULTON

[1] Richard Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha Presented in Modern Literary Form* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895), vii.
[2] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1718.

I. Introduction

In response to increasing anxieties around the internal tensions within the Biblical canon and corollary suspicions regarding what these tensions might signify about the fallibility and unreliability of the Bible's human authors, scholars of both the Bible and comparative literature[3] began to advocate for the curative application of literary methods to the study of biblical texts. These scholars cast their enterprise in apologetic terms,[4] as a defense of the enduring value of these texts against the charges of their cultured despisers. By identifying larger artistic unities and literary coherence where other scholars found only compositional fissures, literary readers of the Bible made a case for the canon's ongoing scholarly and cultural capital on *aesthetic* rather than historical grounds.

The "Bible as Literature" movement is typically identified with a shift in Biblical scholarship that gained momentum in the last three decades of the twentieth century in relationship to the rise of New Criticism in literary studies.[5] This relatively recent movement, embodied in the work of figures like Robert Alter or Frank Kermode, was marked by the publication of various popular literary guides to biblical poetry and narrative as well as smaller shifts in biblical scholarship "from history to story": away from questions of origins and antiquity toward modes of literary criticism and appreciation.[6] But the deployment of a literary approach to the Bible as a defense against the potential ravages of higher critical scholarship actually has a much longer history.

As early as the late nineteenth century, writers from a variety of disciplines began to publish literary guides to the Bible.[7] These guides, often designed as introductory material for undergraduate

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[3] With a few exceptions, the key figures in the Bible as Literature movement (Richard Moulton, Robert Alter, Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode) were literary critics, housed in English or Comparative Literature departments who began their study of the Bible long after they had established their career in their primary discipline.

[4] The polemic of Bible as Literature texts against the methods or perceived "dominance" of higher criticism is preserved in their lengthy introductions. See, for example: Robert Alter, "To the Reader," in *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), ix, xlvii.

[5] If the literary study of the Bible is given a longer pre-history, it either skips back several centuries to early forerunners of the movement—scholars like Johann Gottfried Herder or Robert Lowth—or else traces the origins of these conversations back only a few decades, overlooking the significant publication surge of literary guides to the Bible at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* Robert Alter paints the turn to read the Bible as Literature as a scholarly movement still in its infant stages—pointing back to the opening essay in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*—"Odysseus' Scar"—as one of the first works of this kind. (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 18; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953]).

[6] At Krister Stendahl's 1983 Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature, he famously quipped, "Now there has been a shift from history to story: the Bible as story, theology as story…The shift in contemporary biblical and theological work from history to story is obvious and well substantiated by a perusal of the program for the annual meeting of our Society of Biblical Literature and of our sister, the American Academy of Religion" (Krister Stehndahl, Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature, 18 December 1983, "The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 [1984], 4).

[7] See, for example, the following: James George Frazer, *Passages of the Bible Chosen for their Literary Beauty and Interest*

courses, claimed to offer their readers an alternative and even preferable set of hermeneutic tools to those long proffered as the "scholarly" or "scientific" approach to the Bible. Some guides, such as that penned by James George Frazer, presented readers with a curated collection of the Bible's best literary materials, "disengaging these gems from their setting, and presenting them in a continuous series," so as to commend the artistic merits of select portions of the canon.[8] Others, like Smith College professors Irving Francis Wood and Elihu Grant, reformatted the Bible entirely in order to submit it as a text within the comparative literature curriculum. Wood and Grant made significant adjustments to the Bible's conventional typesetting and developed new labels for the text's various and interwoven literary genres, hoping to reframe the dust-covered family Bible as species of classic literature that their students might enjoy with "intelligent appreciation."[9]

As with previous generations' appropriation of literary methods for biblical interpretation, the authors of these turn-of the-century guides attempted to secure the Bible's ongoing cultural significance on the grounds of its aesthetic virtues.[10] This was in large part a defensive move, leveraged strategically in response to the rise of higher criticism within European and American universities and growing doubts about the reliability of biblical authors or of the text's historical foundation.[11] But the move to shift the locus of the Bible's authority to its artistic merits also capitalized on the momentum of changing tides in wider public debates about the moral or spiritual value of fiction, particularly among Christian readers. Earlier aspersions about the fictional character of Biblical narratives cast by scholars like William Winwood Reade could now be reinterpreted positively in light of a shift in popular opinion concerning the up-building capacity of works of

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(London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895); Albert J. Beveridge, *The Bible as Good Reading* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1907; Richard G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings.* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895; Richard G. Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha*, *Presented in Modern Literary Form* New York, The Macmillan Company, 1895; Richard G. Moulton, John P. Peters & A.B. Bruce, *The Bible as Literature* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1896); Irving Francis Wood & Elihu Grant, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1914).

[8] James George Frazer, *Passages of the Bible Chosen for the Literary Beauty and Interest,* vi.

[9] Wood & Grant, *The Bible as Literature*, 6.

[10] As mentioned in a previous footnote, this is of course not the first wave of "literary" interpretations of the Bible. Prominent forerunners of the Bible as Literature movement in the late nineteenth century include Johann Gottfried Herder, Bishop Robert Lowth, John Husbands and Anthony Blackwall (to name only a few).

[11] See Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). There are, of course, exceptions to the defensive posture of the majority of the literary guides to the Bible published in this period. See, for example, William Leonard Courtney's *The Literary Man's Bible,* in which lays out his principle aim as "to give the reader the latest results of Biblical criticism and to set before his eyes the extraordinary literary value of the Bible," combining rather than compartmentalizing these two approaches to Biblical reading. (William Leonard Courtney, *The Literary Man's Bible: A Selection of Passages from the Old Testament, Historic, Poetic and Philosophic, Illustrating Hebrew Literature* [London: Chapman and Hall, 1908], vii).

fiction.[12] If associations between biblical narratives and literary fiction were once construed as a threat to the Bible's authority—tantamount to accusations of falsehood[13]—these same associations could now be reread as a case for the Bible's cultural worth and, at the same time, as its legitimizing credentials to stand among other classic literatures as a source for moral education.[14]

The previous chapter set the stage for the negative momentum higher criticism lent to the rise of literary approaches to the Bible—as a potential threat and therefore a galvanizing force for a robust defense of the Bible's integrity as a literary whole. This first portion of this chapter begins by looking at the positive momentum that contributed to the Bible as Literature movement in the late nineteenth century as Christian readers began to change their minds and their rhetoric about the moral and spiritual value of literary fiction. From there, I move to consider how biblical scholars began to consider the ways in which the Bible might be understood along these lines as a work of high literary as well as spiritual value. To further this discussion, I take up the works of one exemplary figure in the early Bible as literature movement—Richard Green Moulton—who capitalized on both the apparent threats posed by higher criticism and the shifts in popular opinion about the spiritual value of fiction as he reframed the Bible as a literary text. By recasting the Bible as a species of high literature, and specifically as a *unified* work of literary genius, scholars like Moulton transfigured the previously threatening human construction of these texts into a source for their ongoing cultural value.

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[12] William Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (New York: Charles Somberby, 1876); Reade writes, for example: "I am firmly persuaded that whatever is injurious to the intellect is also injurious to the moral life; and on this conviction I base my conduct with respect to Christianity. That religion is pernicious to the intellect; it demands that the reason shall be sacrificed upon the altar; it orders civilized men to believe in the legends of a savage race" (Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man,* 526).

[13] You can find claims about the fictional quality of some biblical stories vehemently opposed in reference works of the period like John Kitto's *A Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature,* when, after narrating the story of Jacob, Kitto announces: "Each competent and unprejudiced judge, on reading these gems of truth, may well exclaim, 'This is history, not mythology; reality, not fiction" (John Kitto, "Jacob," *A Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature Volume 2* [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845]).

[14] Though this chapter will focus on a later stage in this conversation, this argument was first popularized by Le Roy J. Halsey for a speech he gave in Louisville, Kentucky, later published in book form as *The Literary Attractions of the Bible; or, a Plea for the Word of God Considered as a Classic*. Halsey grounded his argument for establishing the Bible as a literary classic in the evangelistic potential of such a move as well as the clear moral superiority of the Bible in comparison to other classic texts. Halsey writes: "It is greatly to be desired that our children and youth should grow up with the conviction firmly fixed in their minds, that the Bible is a classic of the very highest authority in all matters of education, taste, and genius; that it holds the same place of preeminence in the republic of letters which it holds in the Church of God….such an impression, early implanted and generally received, would do much to save our young people from the evils of that flimsy, superficial literature, which…is coming in upon us like a flood. It would do much to rescue the rising generation from that deluge of fiction, which now threatens to overlay the learning of this boasted nineteenth century with a deeper detritus of trash than that of all the geological epics" (Le Roy Jones Halsey, *The Literary Attractions of the Bible; or, a Plea for the Word of God Considered as a Classic* [New York: Charles Scribner, 1858].

Scholars like Moulton successfully advanced a compelling vision of the Bible's artistic value and coherence. But by erring on the side of literary unity as a reaction to what Meir Sternberg would later call "the excesses of historical scholarship,"[15] these scholars offered readers few resources for interpreting the diversity of biblical narration or the inner-canonical literary tensions that higher criticism laid bare. The choice to play to the unifying capacities of literary reading would set the terms for literary readings of the Bible for the next century, and shape the narrative-driven theologies that took up this circumscribed, reactive sense of the scope and method of "literary" reading. This chapter takes a look back at one exemplary figure in the modern turn to story in biblical interpretation, and considers how a strategic decision to read the Bible as a *unity* became a functional rule for interpreting this text as literature.

II. Higher Criticism and the Specter of Fiction

The nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of critical treatments of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Alongside a growing interest in the historical processes behind the composition and redaction of biblical literature, readers also took up an interest in corollary discussions about the fictional or mythological content of these two canons. Scholars of comparative history and literature set out to explore the construction of biblical literature on new and often controversial terms. Against strong opposition from sectors of the public and some of their scholarly colleagues, these scholars attempted to clear the interpretive ground of the old dogmatisms. In some cases, they acted from an antagonistic posture toward Christian belief, but just often, these scholars wrote with a self-proclaimed scholarly piety, "endeavouring" as Albert Schweitzer famously put it, "to keep a place for the religious life in the thought of the present."[16]

Debates over the historicity of the gospel narratives led to the publication of some 60,000 'Lives of Jesus' over the course of the nineteenth century.[17] David Friedrich Strauss wrote one of the best-known works of this kind, *Das Leben Jesu,* in 1835, which was later translated into English by

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[15] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8.
[16] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 2.
[17] See Jennifer Stevens, "Nineteenth Century Lives of Jesus," in *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination 1860-1920*, 34.

George Eliot.[18] In this text, Strauss summarized the ideas of several generations of scholars before him, advancing a lengthy argument for the mythological content of the gospel narratives. Through a series of close readings, Strauss argued that the stories of Jesus in the New Testament could no longer be interpreted by modern readers in the supernatural terms that previous generations had accepted without question; nor could the gospels' descriptions of these supernatural events be interpreted away rationalistically. Instead, readers ought to take seriously the religious imagination of these early authors,[19] and understand that the use of genres like fiction and myth was a "necessary vehicle of expression" for the truth of the gospel writers' own transcendent experiences.[20] Despite Strauss' extensive claims to the contrary, his book was understood by the wider public and many of his academic colleagues to have "threatened the historic foundations of Christianity," and he was quickly forced to resign from the only faculty position he would ever occupy.[21]

Despite the controversy incited by Strauss' text, literary critic Matthew Arnold (who is credited with the first use of the phrase "the Bible as literature"[22]) raised similar questions several decades later about the fictional content of the gospel narratives. In 1874, Arnold published an essay entitled *Literature and Dogma*, addressed to modern readers who were struggling to interpret the Bible in the ways that they had been taught: as a historically reliable text.[23] In Arnold's estimation, the false historicization of the Bible's mythological content was detrimental to the ongoing life and vitality of modern Christianity. "The Bible cannot possibly die," Arnold wrote, "but then the churches cannot

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[18] David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu: kritisch bearbeiter* (Tübingen: C.F. Osiander, 1835); translated into English as *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined,* trans. Marian Evans, (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860). For another popular work of this kind, see Ernest Renan, *La Vie de Jesus* (Paris: Michel Levy Freres, 1863).

[19] What Strauss elsewhere calls "the product of a particular mental tendency of a community," drawing on Hegel's account of the slow development of conceptual sophistication and understanding across time and civilizations (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined: Vol. 1*, 70).

[20] Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined: Vol. 1*, 27. It is important to note that for Strauss, this recognition does not diminish the eternal truth of the gospels, but simply relocates it outside of the dimension of history. As Strauss writes, "the supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension remain eternal truths whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts" (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined,* lii.)

[21] Erik Linstrum, "Strauss' Life of Jesus: Publication and the Politics of the German Public Sphere," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71 (2010): 593-616.

[22] Though, as David Norton notes, Arnold's first use of the term includes a pregnant comma. While making a case for the use of the Bible in schools, Arnold writes, as an aside: "this is one reason why the fruitful use of the Bible, as literature, in our schools for the people, is at present almost impossible" See Matthew Arnold, *A Bible-Reading for Schools: The Great Prophecy of Israel's Restoration: Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1872), xi.

[23] Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1873).

even conceive the Bible without the gloss which they at present put upon it, and this gloss, as certainly, cannot possibly live."[24]

Like Strauss before him, Arnold argued that the error of the Bible's modern reader lies in the unfitting interpretive frame they apply to the text's mythical content. Biblical texts must be understood in their own terms—as human literary constructions that are "not rigid, fixed and scientific."[25] Arnold writes, "the more we convince ourselves of the liability of the New Testament writers to mistake, the more we really bring out the greatness and worth of the New Testament. For the more the reporters were prone to delusion, the more does Jesus become independent of the mistakes they made."[26] Indeed, the primary objective of New Testament literature is to reveal Christ, Arnold insists, "not to establish the immunity of its writers from error."[27]

Arnold's text was met with similar controversy and extensive criticism—both regarding his method and his conclusions.[28] These criticisms forced Arnold to clarify, in a sequel to *Literature and Dogma*, that his ideas about biblical interpretation had never been antagonistic toward Christian faith, but only toward the naïve hermeneutics too often applied to these texts. He explains:

> Never let us deny to [the passion] story power and pathos, or treat with hostility ideas which have entered so deep into the life of Christendom. But the story is not true; it never really happened. These personages never did meet together, and speak, and act, in the manner related. The personages of the Christian Heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus and their conversations.[29]

Naïve belief in the historical reality of these events is bad science—"uncorrected data of a time of imperfect observation and boundless credulity"—and only an honest reckoning with the fictional quality of these stories can cure modern Christian discourse of its bygone "hollowness."[30]

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[24] Arnold, *Literature and Dogma,* ix. Comparing this break he endorsed from the naïve belief in the historicity of biblical miracles to the Protestant church's historic departure from Rome, Arnold adds that "miracles have to go the same way as clericalism and tradition."
[25] Arnold, *Literature and Dogma,* xv.
[26] Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: Popular Edition*, 111. While this interpretive proposal does, in certain respects, bear a resemblance to the critical treatments of a scholar like Wellhausen, Arnold was not advocating for the identification of *certain* fictions (calling out unreliable narrators from a larger host of biblical witnesses). Rather, Arnold pushes for the ready acceptance of the general proclivity of biblical authors toward literary fiction.
[27] Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: Popular Edition*, 111.
[28] See James C. Livingston, "Matthew Arnold and His Critics on the Truth of Christianity: A Reappraisal for the Centenary of *Literature and Dogma," Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973): 386-401.
[29] Matthew Arnold, *God and The Bible: A Review of Objections to Literature and Dogma* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1884), xiv.
[30] Arnold, *God and the Bible*, xviii.

Questions about the presence of fictional or mythological content in the Hebrew Bible developed in a slightly different way than that in the New Testament, emerging in relationship to nineteenth century advances in the comparative study of neighboring Near Eastern literatures. In 1872, a young British Assyriologist named George Smith discovered a series of broken cuneiform tablets in the British museum that contained text fragments from ancient Babylonian myths—what we now know as the "The Epic of Gilgamesh."[31] Smith found strong parallels between the texts of these various Babylonian myths and the primeval history recorded in the book of Genesis. In particular, he noted a strong resemblance between the biblical story of Noah and a few fragments of this epic that described a great flood along with a subsequent deployment of birds to test and see whether the waters had indeed receded.[32]

While some readers celebrated this discovery as confirmation of historical events like the Noahic deluge, others used it to substantiate arguments about the essential unity of all world religions. An editorial printed in *The New York Times* a few days after the public notification of Smith's findings described these polarized reactions, claiming:

> The discovery is evidently destined to excite a lively controversy. For the present the orthodox people are in great delight, and are very much prepossessed by the corroboration which it affords to Biblical history. It is possible, however, as has been pointed out, that the Chaldean inscription, if genuine, may be regarded as a confirmation of the statement that there are various traditions of the deluge apart from the Biblical one, which is perhaps legendary like the rest.[33]

Indeed, the discovery did elicit the controversy this editorial predicted as scholars continued to publish their findings about stories on those cuneiform tablets that paralleled biblical narratives. These parallels raised questions about the relationship between these two primeval histories, and the plausible recognition, in the words of Friedrich Delitzsch, "that many a Babylonian feature has

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[31] George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis: Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod: Babylonian Fables, and Legends of the Gods; From the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1876). George Smith, tragically, died long before his time—and his fate was largely a product of the success of his research. Smith died in 1876, the same year his findings were published, after the buzz about his discovery of the Epic of Gilgamesh sent him on an expedition to Syria. He requested to be sent home early from his expedition, but his request was denied, and he died in Aleppo at the age of 36. (Vybarr Cregan-Reid, "The Tragic Tale of George Smith and Gilgamesh," *The Telegraph,* September 21, 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk).

[32] One of Smith's colleauges—E.A. Wallis Budge—reports that, upon this discovery, Smith grew so excited he began to undress himself, right in the middle of the British Museum. Smith makes no mention of this episode in any of his own writings. (David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006], 11-12).

[33] "Noah's Log," *The New York Times,* 22 December 1872, 1.

attached itself even to our religious ideas through the medium of the Bible."[34]

Discussions about the possible inclusion of fiction within the canon by thinkers like Strauss, Arnold and Smith (to name only a few) presented serious challenges to conventional accounts of biblical literature. These challenges came not only from the predictable angle of what might be lost—namely, confidence in the Bible as history—but also from the pernicious associations these texts might acquire by virtue of their identification with literary fiction.

III. Christianity's Changing Relationship to Fiction

Scholarly assertions about the presence of literary fiction in the Bible were particularly weighty for churchgoers during this period. Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, many Christian leaders had taken a public stand against what they considered to be the grave spiritual dangers of literary fiction.[35] For generations, Christian theologians like Jonathan Edwards or Timothy Dwight spoke out against the popularity of fiction among their neighbors and even among their congregants.[36] Edwards declaimed the publication of so many volumes "of injurious moral tendency," the greater portion of which was "prepared and issued to please the public taste, depraved as it may be—not to correct it." Novels, in Edwards's estimation, are designed to inflame the imaginations of their young readers, to "infold them more strongly in the illusions of sin, not to direct their minds to heaven and save the soul."[37] Dwight raised similar concerns, addressing the young novel reader who "must one day act in the real world," after slowly being made unfit to reckon with its fallen condition by means of an extended exposure to unrealistic rags-to-riches fantasies. "She has read herself into a heroine," Dwight writes, in a less than commendatory fashion, "the curse pronounced upon mankind, is to her, to lose its gloomy influence."[38]

By the nineteenth century, as fiction became increasingly popular, those who prophesied against the rise of this genre took to the streets, publishing tracts urging readers to "PUT DOWN

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[34] Friedrich Delitzsch, "Bible and Babel," (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1903), 67.
[35] Not all Christians objected to works of fiction on moral or spiritual grounds, and there was certainly a middle ground between the claim that fiction was a sinful form of falsehood and the claim, on the other hand, that the bible itself was an "egregious example of fiction" (See Jennifer Stevens, *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1920,* 5-7).
[36] For more on Dwight's aversion to the novel, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[37] Quoted by Jan Blodgett, *Protestant Evangelical Literary Culture and Contemporary Society* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1954), 22.
[38] Timothy Dwight, "Letter XLVIII," in *Travels in New-England and New-York: Vol. 1* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1821), 516.

THAT NOVEL!"[39] and placing essays in widely circulated journals warning readers about the noxious effects of literary fiction.[40] These essays argued that this fashionable genre was responsible for deforming the moral habits of young readers and raising up feeble minded and undiscerning publics.[41] In 1846, *The Methodist Quarterly Review* published an article on the dangers of reading that warned its subscribers against the tendency of fictional works to "unduly excite the sensibilities and give them a preponderance over the reasoning faculties"—particularly among susceptible young people, whose imagination "needs to be curbed and disciplined."[42] The author amplified his point further, going so far as to argue that it would be better for his readers "to admit the most deadly enemy into our houses—the plague would be comparatively harmless because it would only expose our families to the momentary pangs of dissolution, whereas bad books ruin their souls forever."[43]

In time, however, public opinion about the moral efficacy of the novel began to shift. This was due not only to the growing popularity of recreational reading among the middle class, but also to the rise of the sentimental novel.[44] Starting in the late eighteenth century, a genre of fiction emerged that lent dramatic form to the moral sense psychology of thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume.[45] Just as moral sense psychologists challenged the virtue of Lockean "bare rationality"

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[39] Claudia Stokes, "The Religious Novel" in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 6: The American Novel 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169.

[40] See, for example, William Gladstone's response to the novel *Robert Elsmere*, which depicts an Oxford clergyman struggling with doubts, incited by German rationalism and biblical criticism. Gladstone claims that the key danger of such novels is that: "We find that, when we meant to go play, we have gone to school…we find that he has put upon us what is not indeed a treatise, but more formidable than if it were" (William E. Gladstone, "*Robert Elsmere" and the Battle of Belief* [New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1888], 4).

[41] The landscape of popular opinion is, of course, impossible to reduce to general trends. Its important to recognize exceptions to these general historical these about religious perceptions of novelistic literature—such as the response of religious readers to John Bunyan's Christian allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress,* or the proliferation of dramatic biographical or auto-biographical "personal narratives"—specifically conversion stories—from religious presses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Jan Blodgett, *Protestant Evangelical Literary Culture and Contemporary Society* [Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997], 11-32).

[42] "Reading" in *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28 ed. George Peck, (New York: Lane & Tippett, 1846), 73-4. "It may be contended that two evils are likely to arise from much indulgence in works of fiction. The one is a tendency to give way to the wild play of the imagination—a practice most deleterious both to the intellectual and moral habits. The other is a disruption of the harmony that ought to exist between the moral emotions and the conduct—a principle of extensive and important influence" (74)

[43] "Reading" *Methodist Quarterly Review*, 77. The author admits that there may be some rare examples of "moral" fiction that may offer some benefit to religious readers, but then adds to this admission: "In answer to all this, it is urged that there is truth in fiction, and that we should converse with truth wherever we find it. There is sweetness in arsenic, but is this a reason why we should feed upon it? The error is the more dangerous because it is mingled with truth."

[44] The term "sentimental novel" is not just a label proffered by later literary historians, but one these novelists adopted themselves, often subtitling their works "A Sentimental Novel," though this practice declined once the term "sentimental" was taken up by literary critics in a pejorative sense (John Mullen, "Sentimental Novels" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel*, ed. John Richetti [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 236).

[45] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* (London: A Millar, 1759); David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (London: A. Millar, 1751).

in the work of moral judgment, the sentimental novel challenged the "materialist speculation" that characterized the casuistic enterprise of many eighteenth-century novels and submitted instead what literary critic James Chandler calls a "sympathetic imaginative mobility."[46] By depicting stirring conversion stories in which fallen men and women are redeemed from their depravity, or in which ordinary men and women develop deeper capacities for fellow feeling by means of a transfiguring experience of sympathy, going on to live lives dedicated to the "benevolent remedying of misfortune," sentimental novels demonstrated human empathy as a necessary faculty in the work of moral judgment.[47]

Sentimental novels challenged certain assumptions about the pernicious effects of literary fiction on virtue and public morality not only by means of their narrative content, but also by way of their substantive social impact.[48] *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, sold half a million copies in the United States during the first five months of its publication in 1852 and was rumored to be lauded by Abraham Lincoln himself as one of the animating causes for the Civil War.[49] Even publications like *The Methodist Review* began to take a more tempered stance toward fiction, criticizing the latent fatalism of novelists like George Eliot, but praising the subtle hardware of moral edification on offer in the works of novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe. "That cabin overturned the slaveholder's mansion," one such article claimed, wielding not loud arguments or doctrines, but the slow persuasions of the imagination, proving "a most effective way to teach is to appear not to do so."[50]

The effect of these new ideas about the moral utility of literary fiction spread well beyond the bounds of the sentimentalist genre.[51] Writers like Anthony Trollope began to defend their use of

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[46] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Bassett, 1690); James Chandler, "On the Face of the Case: Conrad, *Lord Jim*, and the Sentimental Novel" in *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 837-864.
[47] Mullen, "Sentimental Novels", 236.
[48] This conjunction of two modes of discourse that occupy the sentimental novel—the affective and the political—is noted by Markman Ellis who writes that this genre was notable "on the one hand for its efficiency in moulding the emotions and feelings of its readers; and on the other, its insertion of matters of political controversy into the text itself" (Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 2).
[49] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: John Casseli, 1852); Lincoln is rumored to have said, upon his introduction to Stowe and in reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "Is this the woman who made this great war?" David S. Reynolds argues that this would have been in keeping with Lincoln's view on the potential impact of shifts in public sentiment—pointing to a statement Lincoln once made in a debate against Stephen Douglas in which he argued, "public sentiment is everything…he who moulds public sentiment is greater than he who makes statues"(David S. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011], x).
[50] Isaac Crook, "Fiction and Fatalism" in *The Methodist Review* Vol 87. ed William V. Kelley (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1905), 438.
[51] For example, Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman begins to write novels in the second half of the nineteenth century as a way to combat the strong polemics of Anti-Catholic historical fiction. Just after Charles Kingsley published his popular novel *Hypatia*—depicting a corrupt early church designed to resemble 19th century Catholicism, Newman

fiction as well as their realistic depictions of elements that more prudish nineteenth century readers might find tasteless by making a case for the novel as a potential instrument of human empathy. In the preface to his novel *The Vicar of Bullhampton,* Trollope defends himself against the charges he imagines that his readers might bring against his sympathetic portrayal of a woman of ill repute.[52] Trollope admits, "to write in fiction of one so fallen as the noblest of her sex…is certainly allure to vice and misery," but adds

> It may perhaps be possible that if the matter be handled with truth to life, some girl, who would have been thoughtless, may be made thoughtful, or some parent's heart may be softened. It may also at last be felt that this misery is worthy of alleviation, as is every misery to which humanity is subject.[53]

Here, before the story commences, Trollope explains to his reader that fiction—if used well—can be more than an instrument of voyeuristic amusement, or an incitement to all manner of imitable evils. Instead, fiction can cultivate human feeling, forging connections between a text's imagined readers and characters they might never encounter in the normal course of life. As Trollope later waxed on the virtues of the realistic novel: "Truth let there be, truth of description, truth of character, human truth as to men and women. If there be such truth, I do not know that a novel can be too sensational."[54]

In light of these shifting feelings about the moral capacities of literary fiction, Christians began not only to read and enjoy such books, but also to produce them in mass, capitalizing on the communicative and affective powers of the genre. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of imaginative biblical fiction,[55] as well as hundreds of "social gospel novels"[56] on the model of books like *The Christmas Carol* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* In 1896, Congregationalist minister Charles Sheldon published what would become by far the most popular novel of this genre, *In His Steps*,

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published *Callista,* re-narrating the same history by depicting the martyrdom of a young convert and her relationship to Catholic faith in a positive, even heroic light. (Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia: or, New Foes with an Old Face* [London: John W. Parker, 1853]; John Henry Newman, *Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century* [London: Burns and Oates, 1856]).

[52] Anthony Trollope, "Preface," to *The Vicar of Bullhampton Vol.1* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1870).

[53] Trollope, *The Vicar of Bullhampton,* vii-viii.

[54] Anthony Trollope, "Novel Reading," 270.

[55] See Michael Ledger-Lomas, "First Century Fiction in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 31 (2009): 59-72.

[56] These are also called "homiletic novels."

which was carried as a serial in 16,000 national newspapers while the book sold more than eight million copies worldwide.[57]

Alongside the commercial success of *In His Steps*, many other popular varieties of Christian fiction flourished at the end of the century. In 1880, the then governor of New Mexico, Lew Wallace, published the immensely popular *Ben Hur*, which depicted a Jewish noble's encounter with a fictionalized historical Jesus.[58] *Ben Hur* quickly became the best-selling novel of all time (far outpacing the previous record holder: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).[59] Other popular works of this genre imagined Jesus in modern garb, walking the streets of urban Chicago or Boston—looking to public rather than ecclesial institutions in order combat widespread social evils like poverty or insobriety.[60] Journalist Harold Frederic's bestselling novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware* depicted pious Christian ministers helplessly struggling against different sorts of demons—namely, the dilatory effects of higher criticism.[61]

In short, over the course of the nineteenth century, Christianity ceased to be among literary fiction's stronger antagonists and emerged instead as one of its strongest proponents. At the end of the century, a little-known writer named Josiah Gilbert Holland opens his novel *The Bay Path* with an apology for the virtues of its genre—one that helpfully substantiates the wider significance of this shift in the relationship between Christianity and literary fiction.[62] Holland writes:

> Fiction, though much abused by those who write it, and persistently traduced by those who do not comprehend its true mission, has always been a favorite mode of communicating truth, and has, for its support, the highest sanctions of Christianity. The Author of the Christian system spake evermore in parables in the illustration of important practical truth…He came to exhibit in human development the true nature of the divine life, and to demonstrate, in human experience, under the influence of legitimate human motives, the beauty of holiness.[63]

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[57] Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (Chicago: Chicago Advance, 1896); Gary Scott Smith, *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880-1925* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 100.
[58] Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880).
[59] "Lew Wallace," in *Hoosiers and the American Story,* ed. James H. Madison and Lee Ann Sandweiss (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 2014), 105.
[60] William Thomas Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer* (Chicago: Laird & Lee Publishers, 1894); Edward Everett Hale, *If Jesus Came to Boston* (Boston: Lamson Wolffe, 1895).
[61] Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, or *Ilumination* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1896). See also Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1888).
[62] Josiah Gilbert Holland, *The Bay Path: A Tale of Adventure and Romance when New England was a Colony* (New York: The Federal Book Company, 1899).
[63] Holland, *The Bay Path,* 5.

Here, Holland recasts the relationship of Christianity to literary fiction, figuring Jesus' teachings as the veritable seedbed of the genre. Christianity slowly retreated from its antagonistic position toward fiction. Instead, Christians began to see Christian teachings (and in particular the teachings of Jesus) as showcasing the genre's highest virtues.

IV. Fiction and the Bible at the Turn of the Century

A number of biblical scholars took advantage of these changing tides in popular opinion so as to recast prior aspersions about the fictional quality of large sections of the Bible in a positive light.[64] The "free exhibition of the literature of the Bible," as one nineteenth-century reverend put it, was no longer seen as a threat to the authority of scripture, but instead as a move deliberately "calculated to strengthen our belief in its divine inspiration," showcasing the Bible's aesthetic powers as a revelation of the creative wonder of God.[65]

In 1893, at the annual meetings of the Chicago Society for Biblical Research, a professor from the Garrett Biblical Institute[66] named Milton Spenser Terry gave an impassioned speech to his fellow scholars, arguing for the admission of the category of "inspired fiction" into the canon of Biblical interpretation.[67] While Terry admits that accepting certain parts of the Bible as fictional

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[64] Though many arguments to reconsider the Bible in terms of its superior literary qualities were attempts to have one's cake and eat it too—to claim the Bible as a species of high literature, while still maintaining a commitment to its historical veracity. See, for example, Albert Beveridge's *The Bible as Good Reading,* as he writes, "The Bible is by far the most admirable compendium of the best short stories to be found in the literature of the world…the French short stories—perfect as they are when compared with other fiction—are crude and prolix compared to the short stories of the Bible, which, after all, are not stories, but the plain telling of human occurrences" (Albert J. Beveridge, *The Bible as Good Reading* [Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1907], 19).

[65] William Trail, *The Literary Characteristics and Achievements of the Bible* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863). Trail writes, "It has been in fashion with our infidel *literati* to represent the Bible as a tasteless, inelegant, unliterary book, composed for the most part in a dull, heavy style, its prose parts entirely wanting in rhetorical finish…now, were this the case, then we must have owned that the Bible cannot have come from him who is the author of language and sentiment; and it is with no other purpose than to throw discredit on its inspiration as being unworthy of a divine author, that the infidel assets it to be deficient in literary attractions. Are we then to yield up the argument to him? Especially, are we to allow him to prejudice ingenuous youth against the Bible, by his unjust representations of its literature, when we have it in our power to invite them to its pages by those very beauties which have a peculiar charm to the young?...Surely not so…it is our duty to invite those of literary tastes and cultures to frequent this second Paradise, fair as the first and more secure; for where its fountains sparkled and its groves entwined their floral beauties, there lurked a serpent to beguile; but here no tempter lies in wait—here no death-bearing tree presents its fruit; but life, and truth, and holiness, sanctifying the literature by which they are adorned, are to be found on every branch; while the God of inspiration, whose voice is in its every sound, is always here, to meet and converse with his children" (Trail, *The Literary Characteristics and Achievements of the Bible,* 15-16).

[66] *Catalogue of the Garrett Biblical Institute*, (Evanston: 1909-10), 5.

[67] "Work and Workers" in *The Biblical World* 1 (1893): 232-235.

might initially seem to "put a heavy burden on evangelical faith," he argues that revelatory texts ought to be taken on their own terms, and that it is indeed "preposterous" to "say *a priori* what form the written Word of God must take on." "What God has sanctified, call thou not uncommon or unclean!"[68] Terry declared, adding: "what are the parables of Jesus but inspired fictions?"[69]

This new approach to the presence of "fiction" in the Bible was cast by its proponents as an asset rather than a threat to the sacred quality of these texts. An interest in biblical "fiction" slowly melded together with studies of biblical poetry, and biblical wisdom traditions to yield a wider interest in "literary studies" of the Bible, designed to equip readers with a sense of the extensive range of the canon's diverse literary forms. Several years after Terry's impassioned address to the Chicago Society for Biblical Research, a number of essays by both scholars and preachers were collated together in a collected volume entitled *The Bible as Literature.*[70] In the introduction to this collection, Reverend Lyman Abbott compared the virtues of a literary approach to the Bible with that of the more conventional dogmatic interpretive modes, concluding that literary reading "is both the more scientific and the more reverent." He explained, "It is not for us to determine what kind of revelation a God of truth must be supposed to have given us and then deduce the character of the Bible from that determination. It is for us to see what kind of revelation He has given us, and to accept that gift humbly, reverentially, thankfully."[71]

The shifting terms of this conversation made space not only for the consideration of biblical texts like Jonah, Esther, or Genesis as possibly "inspired fictions," or the comparison of biblical poetry to other classic poetic traditions, but also for larger considerations about the Bible's place within the increasingly nonsectarian landscape of modern primary and secondary education.[72] The newly foregrounded literary qualities of the biblical canon provided fodder for conversations that had been bubbling up over the course of the century about the possible admission of the Bible into

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[68] Milton S. Terry, "Inspired Fiction," in *Timely Topics: Political, Biblical, Ethical, Practical, Discussed by College Presidents, Professors and Eminent Writers of Our Time* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1892), 245.
[69] Milton S. Terry, "Inspired Fiction," 241.
[70] *The Bible as Literature,* ed. Richard G. Moulton, John P. Peters, A.B. Bruce (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1896). The collection bears a remarkable resemblance to Robert Alter and Frank Kermode's collected volume *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* published nearly a century later (though there are fewer preachers in the latter collection).
[71] Lyman Abbott, "Introduction," in *The Bible as Literature*, x. Abbott is perhaps better known for his theological defense of Darwinian thought. See Lymann Abbott, *The Evolution of Christianity* (Boston: Houghton, Mufflin and Company, 1892).
[72] For more on how this conversation played out before scholars like Moulton emerged onto the scene, see Paul C. Gutjahr, "Pedagogy," in *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 113-142; Stephen K. Green, "The Rise of Nonsectarian Public Education," in *The Bible, the School, and the Constitution: The Clash that Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11-44.

the canon of Western literary classics. Those who advocated for its admission argued that the Bible ought to serve as a component part of a properly edifying liberal education—not only for its virtues as a moral or spiritual guide (and indeed its superior virtues in this respect to the classics currently on offer), but also for the text's distinct artistic merits.[73]

In light of these changing feelings toward the moral and spiritual capacities of fiction, and under the interpretive pressures posed by the rise of higher criticism, scholars began to publish not only a variety of different "literary guides" to the Bible, but also reformulations of the Bible itself as a literary text. These literary guides and literary Bibles aimed to equip readers with a deeper appreciation of the canon as a species of high literature and as the substance of a liberal education by providing tools to help readers identify the literary genres of the Bible and, perhaps most importantly, to see the higher artistic and conceptual unities that draw together the whole.

V. Richard Green Moulton

Ten years after the appearance of the first English translation of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschicte Israels,* an English professor at the University of Chicago[74] named Richard Green Moulton (1849-1924) published one of the first and most popular literary Bibles of this period.[75] Moulton's literary Bible utilized his training as a scholar of comparative literature as well as his own approach to the task of literary criticism as he worked to rebrand the Bible as an aesthetic object and submit it within the canon of classic literature.[76]

Inductive Interpretation

[73] Richard Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895). For an earlier articulation of the argument for the inclusion of the Bible as a component part of a liberal education, see Samuel Sterling Sherman, "The Bible as a Classic: A Baccalaureate Address, Delivered at the Third Annual Commencement of Howard College" (Tuscaloosa: M.D.J. Slade, 1850).
[74] Richard Moulton helped found the University of Chicago with its first President, biblical scholar William Rainey Harper. But while Harper was one of the loud champions for the scholarly as well as spiritual merits of higher critical study of the Bible on American shores, Moulton does not appear to have taken cues from his colleague in this area.
[75] For more biographical information, see William Fiddian Moulton, *Richard Green Moulton: A Memoir by His Nephew* (New York: Macmillian & Company, 1926).
[76] Richard Green Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha Presented in Modern Literary Form* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895). *The Modern Reader's Bible* was originally published as twenty-one individual, shorter books before finally being published together as a single text. ("Richard Green Moulton," in *English Language Bible Translators,* ed. William E. Paul [London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003], 169).

Before his prolonged venture into biblical literature, Moulton built up his scholarly stature by means of a distinctive approach to a different set of classics, which would later be deemed a significant forerunner to "New Criticism" in literary studies.[77] In Moulton's early studies of Milton, Euripides, and Shakespeare, he departed from the conventions of literary scholarship in this period, which were animated by contests of individual judgment or taste (i.e., endless debates over whether or not Shakespeare was truly a master of the English language). Against these scholarly norms, Moulton made a case for what he called a "scientific" approach to literary interpretation.[78]

In one of his early critical volumes, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist,* Moulton claimed that neither dramatic nor literary criticism should be understood in terms of subjective feeling or prejudicial preference.[79] Instead, literary interpretation should be understood as a form of inductive science with repeatable results. He explains: "interpretation in literature is of the nature of the scientific hypothesis, the truth of which is tested by the degree of completeness with which it explains the details of the literary work as they actually stand."[80] He continues:

> The inductive critic will interpret a complex situation, not by fastening attention on its striking elements and ignoring others as oversights and blemishes, but by putting together with business-like exactitude all the author has given, weighing, balancing and standing by the product. He will not consider that he has solved the action of a drama by some leading plot, or some central idea powerfully suggested in different parts, but will investigate patiently until he can find a scheme which will give point to the inferior as well as to the leading scenes, and in connection with which all the details are harmonized in their proper proportions. In this way he will be raising a superstructure of exposition that rests, not on authority however high, but upon a basis of indisputable fact.[81]

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[77] Suzy Anger, "Literary Meaning and the Question of Value: Victorian Literary Interpretation," *Pedagogy* 4.1 (2004): 27-41, 35; Sarah Lawall, "Richard Moulton and the Idea of World Literature," in *No Small World: Visions and Revisions of World Literature* ed. Michael Thomas Carroll (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 6. Alternatively, David Norton calls him "a structuralist before his time" (David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature: Volume 2,* 277).

[78] Many of these early publications came as a consequence of Moulton's relationship to The American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, as part of his work as an early exponent for distance learning. Richard Green Moulton, *Four Studies in Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: The American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, 1891); Richard Green Moulton, *Euripides for English Audiences* (Philadelphia: The American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, 1891), Richard Green Moulton, *Studies in Milton's Poetic Art* (Philadelphia: The American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, 1891).

[79] Moulton was especially concerned that standard tropes of literary criticism that operate on a judgment model will, in their preset prejudice, too often miss in their object of study whatever betrays their expectations. He writes, "It is a foundation principle in art culture, as well as human intercourse, that *sympathy is the grand interpreter:* secrets of beauty will unfold themselves to the sunshine of sympathy, while they will wrap themselves all the closer against the tempest of skeptical questionings" (Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 7).

[80] Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 25.

[81] Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 25.

On Moulton's reading, exposition was not a matter of evaluating a work according to a pre-determined set of literary laws; nor was it a matter of measuring a text based on what it ought to do or be, nor still is it a matter of judging it by its accordance with the terms set by the classic literatures that precede it. The laws of literature, Moulton explains, are not like the laws of a nation. The laws of a nation are *external* and binding upon its members such that these members could possibly break or violate those laws, and in so doing be held accountable for their infraction. The laws of literature, on the other hand, are like that of a science: internal to the object of study, such that their apparent violation stands as invitation toward a better, richer understanding of the object.

Here, Moulton cites the importance of utilizing the details of a text in order to distinguish between "literary species"—or genres. These genres provide functional laws—establishing the proper hermeneutic frame for interpretation.[82] An apparent violation of a text's "law" (or genre) merely suggests the need for further study, and perhaps a new frame. Exposition, then, must utilize the details of a literary work—its plot elements, the action and speech of its characters—in order to establish the text's genre and subsequently determine its own corollary laws of interpretation—laws that set a "*limit* on the variability of the subjective impressions" and enable literary criticism to produce consistent, repeatable results.[83] This inductive approach to literary interpretation with its focus on the revelatory capacities of a text's genre and its ability to establish and reproduce stable interpretive results would set the terms for Moulton's turn toward biblical interpretation in the final decade of the nineteenth century, and would go on to shape many of the literary and theological readings of biblical narrative that would follow.[84]

The Modern Reader's Bible

The Modern Reader's Bible, which was published in serial form from 1896 to 1897, was a literary formulation of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (as well a few selections from

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[82] Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 32. Moulton writes, "In a scientific treatment of literature, at all events, an elementary axiom must be: *That inductive criticism is mainly occupied in distinguishing literary species*." Elsewhere he adds, "a man who should peruse drama under the impression that he was reading an essay would go wildly astray as to the significance to what he was reading" (Moulton, *World Literature and its Place in General Culture,* 60).

[83] Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, 24.

[84] Moulton writes, "There is an inductive science of literary criticism. As botany deals inductively with the phenomena of vegetable life and traces the laws underlying them, as economy reviews and systematizes on inductive principles the facts of commerce, so there is a criticism not less inductive in character which has for its subject-matter literature" (Moulton, *Shakespeare as Dramatic Artist,* 1)

the Apocrypha).[85] It was "literary" less in its distinctive translation (the text was closely based on the English Revised Version[86]) than in its arrangement and typographical design. The popularity of Moulton's Bible—which would go through eighteen printings in the four decades after its initial publication[87]—spurred Moulton to publish an impressive number of additional literary versions of and guides to the Bible over the course of his lifetime,[88]earning him a reputation as "the most energetic popularizer of a literary approach to the Bible that there has ever been."[89]

Moulton's method in rebranding the Bible as a literary text was twofold. First, he wanted to undo the damage inflicted to the Bible's page design by centuries of scribes, printers, and commentators who had clouded biblical prose and poetry with intricate systems of superscript and excessive marginalia. By clearing the text of versification and reference material and by arranging the typeset of various sections in order to accord visually with the text's literary genre (be that play or essay or lyrical poetry), Moulton hoped he might finally enable a form of reading appropriate to that old adage of the Protestant Reformers: "the Bible is its own best interpreter."[90]

The system of superscript that characterized the printed page of the Bible for centuries had, turned the text into a "monotonous uniformity of numbered sentences" more "suggestive of an itemized legal instrument" than any classic literature.[91] "This strange form of our bibles was not given to them by the sacred writers themselves," Moulton insists, but by medieval scribes and commentators,[92] who gave a form to the Bible that made its contents suitable for commentary—for

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[85] Including the books of Tobit, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus

[86] Moulton made slight changes to the RV "as are involved in the adaptation to modern literary structure." He makes a case for the superiority of the RV over the KJV in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, when he compares these two alongside the Authorized Version and claims that the RV is the only translation to render the true literary unity of the text (Moulton, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 83).

[87] Leland Ryken, "The Bible as Literature: A Brief History," in *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible,* ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 57.

[88] Including, but not limited to: Richard Green Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (Boston: Heath & Co., 1898); *A Short Introduction to the Literature of the Bible* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1901); *The Bible at a Single View* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918); *Select Masterpieces of Biblical Literature* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897).

[89] David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature: Volume 2,* 277.

[90] Or: "*Sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres"*

[91] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* v. We see this typographical technique also in classics scholar Richmond Lattimore's 1979 translation of the four gospel narratives and the book of Revelation that similarly removes verses and chapter divisions from the text (Richmond Lattimore, *The Four Gospels and the Revelation* [New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1979]).

[92] In Moulton's *The Literary Study of the Bible,* he writes that while the intention of these scribes is "nothing but reverent," nevertheless, "the effect of their imperfect reading is to degrade sacred literature into a pious scrap-book. I have called this tendency medieval: it is a relic of the Middle Ages under the influence of which arose our earliest translations of the Bible into modern tongues. The thought of the Middle Ages is distinguished by disconnectedness. The schoolmen were not remarkable for successful investigation or wide reflectiveness, but they surpassed all men in subtlety of discussion;

lengthy disquisition on individual sections of text[93]—but less amenable to their true literary character.[94] This peculiar arrangement of the text was to blame for the distance between modern readers and the texts of the Bible, and for that reader's consistent recourse to cross-references or supplementary study materials. "But the remedy aggravates the disease," Moulton explains, as the demand for commentary only augments this sense of distance.[95] As Moulton would state again two decades later in emphatic shorthand: "*Annotation is interruption.*"[96]

Second, Moulton wished to place his own cleaner copy of the biblical text in a physical book design more suitable to literary reading. In the text's first two printings, Moulton divided the canon into dozens of smaller volumes and printed these smaller editions as collectible pocket hardbacks[97] (roughly the size of the then popular Temple Shakespeare collection).[98] Later printings would go on to combine these smaller editions into one composite volume, adding back versification in the margins (so as to resemble the modern printing conventions of Homeric literature or collections of Shakespeare's plays). In either printed form, Moulton's Bible was carefully designed to give it the look and form of literary classics in his time.

In addition to removing chapter and verse divisions from the body of the text, Moulton explains that he will be setting aside the theological and doctrinal matters that take up too much space in conventional bibles, overfilling the page with large sections of explanatory material cross-referential marginalia around the main body of the text. Instead, Moulton explains that his redesign foregrounds the text in its natural form. "The revelation which is the basis of our modern religion has been made in the form of literature," Moulton writes; "grasp of its literary structure is the true starting point for spiritual interpretation."[99]

To this end, Moulton makes several important shifts in the structure of these texts—visible in their printed format on the page as well as the reordered table of contents. Utilizing "internal

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indeed, it would almost seem that with them the process of discussing was more important than the conclusion attained. Accordingly their age gave special prominence to the isolated proposition" (Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible,* 82).

[93] Moulton, *World Literature and its Place in General Culture*, 60.

[94] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, v. Moulton adds "The Bible goes back to a remote antiquity, when literature indeed was at its highest development, but when there was no corresponding development in the art of writing such as would enable manuscripts to reflect differences in literary form."

[95] Moulton, *World Literature and its Place in General Culture*, 63.

[96] Richard Green Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View,* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 101.

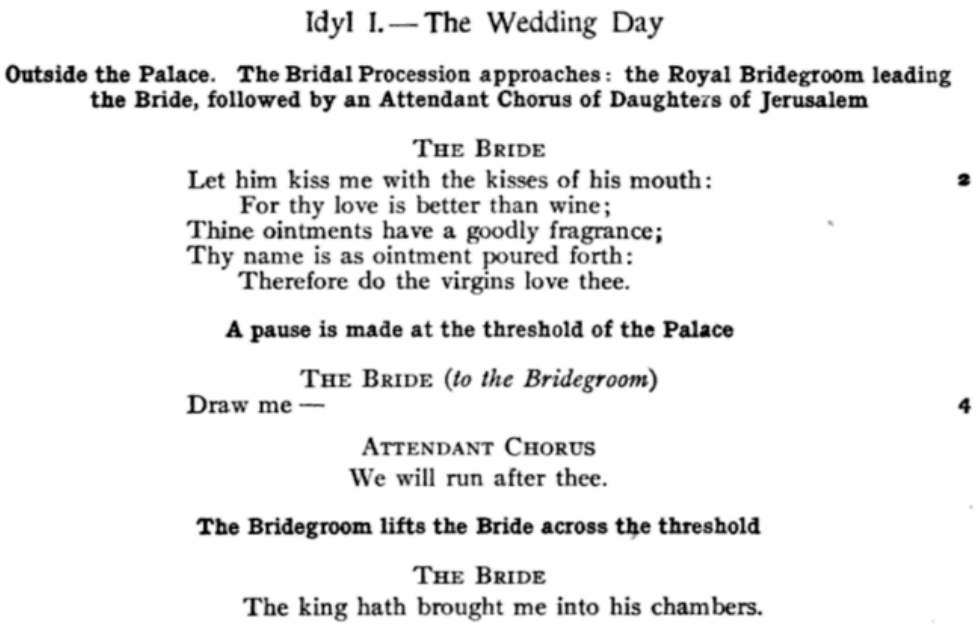
[97] That is, roughly 14 centimeters high by 11 centimeters wide.

[98] Four years after the commencement of Moulton's publication of these smaller literary volumes of the Bible, the publisher of the Temple Shakespeare series J.M. Dent & Co, presented their own literary Bible in this pocket hardback format. (*The Temple Bible*. Various Editors, 23 vols [London: J.M. Dent & Co. 1901-1903]).

[99] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, vii.

evidence of the writings themselves," and "principles of comparative literature" along with the wonders of "modern printing," Moulton presents a form of the text that is reordered and organized in accordance with what he takes to be the literary structure of the Bible's various component parts. The Song of Songs, for example, is broken up, and printed as a series of idylls (see Fig. 1), complete with assigned roles and stage directions to clarify the dramatic action of this plot.[100]

FIGURE 1



Idyl I.—The Wedding Day

Outside the Palace. The Bridal Procession approaches: the Royal Bridegroom leading the Bride, followed by an Attendant Chorus of Daughters of Jerusalem

THE BRIDE

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: 2
For thy love is better than wine;
Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance;
Thy name is as ointment poured forth:
Therefore do the virgins love thee.

A pause is made at the threshold of the Palace

THE BRIDE (*to the Bridegroom*)

Draw me — 4

ATTENDANT CHORUS

We will run after thee.

The Bridegroom lifts the Bride across the threshold

THE BRIDE

The king hath brought me into his chambers.

The Psalms are similarly broken into stanzas and rearranged—often in the style of the Greek poetry—with lines assigned to the chorus or a cast of accompanying speakers. Ecclesiastes is divided between a series of brief essays and interpolated collections of indented proverbial sayings.[101] Lamentations is an acrostic dirge.[102] The last sixteen chapters of Isaiah are divided from the rest of the book and recast as its own eight-stage rhapsody, prefaced like a play, with an introduction to its cast of characters.[103]

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[100] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 886-897.
[101] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 747-875.
[102] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 876-886.
[103] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 471-542.

These typographically foregrounded literary genres also determine the order of the books in Moulton's Bible. Job, for example, is moved away from its former proximity to the Psalms and Proverbs in the "Bible Poetry" section to the later subcategory of "Bible Philosophy." Apocryphal materials (Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, etc.) are not set apart at the end of the first testament as with standard Bible printings, but are placed instead within their respective generic category. Moulton explains the design of this alternative structure not only a matter of assisting a reader in their identification of a text's true literary form, but also as a means of lending a clearer form and shape to the canon's true literary unity. "These sixty books, with all their varieties of age, authorship, literary form," Moulton writes, "are, when properly arranged, felt to draw together with a connectedness like the unity of a dramatic plot."[104]

By offering the reader a version of biblical literature faithful to this larger dramatic plot and illustrative of its literary variety—matching the visual form of the text on the page to its distinct genre, and bringing those genres together in various smaller "collections" throughout the text—Moulton thought his restructured Bible might provide assistance in the preliminary stages of reading. If a reader could visually recognize the appropriate form of interpretation, this would minimize the need for explanatory reference materials. "The page setting, if only it is correct" Moulton adds, "is itself the best of commentaries."[105]

In addition to sidestepping theological discussions or traditional versification, Moulton also distinguishes his literary reformulation of the Bible from what were then the animating concerns of biblical scholarship. Moulton writes in the introduction, "It is equally a principle of *The Modern Reader's Bible* to exclude another set of questions, which have absorbed immense attention at the present time, and are popularly known as the Higher Criticism."[106] While Moulton admits that scholarly discussions about the division between sources of biblical composition "are of great importance in their own sphere" he insists that this sphere is "*history*, not literature; it should be described not by the term 'biblical,' but 'Semitic'." Moulton expands on his understanding of this necessary division of interpretive labors as follows:

> For those whose interest is the evolution of Semitic institutions it is important to know the exact authorship and dates of various parts of Scripture, to inquire into the origins and sources of the materials used by the Biblical writers…The critical discussions concern only

[104] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, viii.
[105] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* vii.
[106] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* vii.

> the Semitic specialist; the interpretation of the Bible is a permanent interest of world literature.[107]

By means of a defense of the disciplinary boundaries between scholarly interests in Semitic history and broader investments in "world literature," Moulton makes a subtle argument that the literary study of the Bible ought to limit itself to the "final form" of the text (though certainly not in those words). Questions about biblical authorship, the combination and redaction of various source materials or the tension between these various compositions, in other words, may be of interest for the "Semitist" or the historian, but not, as Moulton sees it, for the student of the text's literary qualities. By lending literary qualities to that "final form," Moulton hoped to move the study of the Bible beyond endless discussions of "gaps and discrepancies."[108] "The purpose underlying the arrangement of matter in this edition," Moulton insists, "is to give assistance in catching the unity of all Scripture."[109]

Perhaps this commitment to unity stands behind one of the starker editorial choices Moulton makes in his literary Bible. Moulton places Luke's gospel at the front of his New Testament, followed by Acts, Romans and the epistles—relegating the other three gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark and John to a peripheral epilogue.[110] In a later explanatory note, Moulton justifies his arrangement, claiming that a proper examination of the literary form of all four gospels "would be inextricably interwoven with another kind of inquiry: the close resemblances between these books, and their not less interesting differences, necessarily raise the question of their mutual relations, of their authorship, and possible connection with a common original." He continues, explaining:

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[107] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, vii-viii.

[108] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1384. Moulton writes, "The principles of arrangement underlying the modern reader's Bible are perhaps nowhere more essential than in the *Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. The reader who has nothing beyond the traditional printing of our bibles to guide him might well suppose himself to be reading a consecutive narrative where, in reality, he has before him a succession of isolated memoirs and papers; an interval of several decades may, without anything to signify a break, intervene between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next. The question is not of minute historical analysis discovering gaps and discrepancies in what presents itself as an harmonious unity; there is nothing but the faulty printing of our bibles—with its absence of forms and divisions universal in other books—to mislead the reader into understanding as a unity what makes no profession to be other than a succession of extracts."

[109] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, viii.

[110] Luke's gospel is the headliner of Moulton's "New Testament History Section," while the other three (along with revelation) stand in an epilogue simply labeled "Other Books of the New Testament." "The gospel of Luke differentiates itself as pure history," Moulton writes, and thus provides an appropriate parallel to the "sacred history" that commences the Old Testament (Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1496).

> Such questions as these cannot be discussed here: not only do they belong to the domain of history rather than literature, but they are, of all historical questions, the question on which there has been the fiercest controversy, and the widest difference and fluctuation of opinion. The aim of the present work goes no further than the placing of the New Testament before the reader in the form which will best enable him to read each book in the light that may be collected from itself.[111]

In other words, it is not merely the lens of historical biblical scholarship, but rather the juxtaposition of the four gospel narratives themselves that poses a threat to the literary appreciation of each of these books, as well as that of the canon as a whole. This juxtaposition incites a comparison of these varied representations of the life of Jesus that Moulton designates as "historical" and not literary. "Many have a longing to get to the texts first hand," Moulton admits, "to fling their minds, without any intervening medium of interpretation, directly upon the original literature." Rather than contesting this impulse toward a historical original, however, Moulton submits his own restructured text as a better medium toward this object, explaining that "one thing only is required for such a purpose—the arrangement of the materials in a rational order: and this is what the present edition attempts."[112] While Moulton's "rational order" of the text does not erase what he calls the "original literature" *per se*, it certainly obscures its original structure from view in the name of offering a new and improved "final form" of the text which will make those materials more suitable to literary reading by keeping historical questions properly in check.[113]

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[111] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1495-1496.

[112] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1497.

[113] Interestingly enough, Moulton does not eliminate similar double narratives in the Hebrew Bible, such as the twice-narrated history offered in the books of Kings and Samuel and then again in Chronicles. Moulton acknowledges the differences between these two histories in the appendix of *The Modern Reader's Bible,* claiming: "The last division of Old Testament history introduces a great change in the character of the history of Israel as presented by itself…The Chronicles, it is true, carries forward the narrative to the Return of the Exiles: but this is only a fragment of its purpose and the whole is presented afresh, from Adam to Nehemiah. And the spirit of the literature is changed from National to Ecclesiastical history; the Hebrew people have silently changed into the Jewish church…that the ideas of State and Church have become separated in men's thoughts is manifested by the very zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah to identify the two." Moulton goes on to say: Such religious history cannot but be interesting. But when we view *The Chronicles* as an element in universal literature, we must feel that here the historical literature of Israel is a river that has run into the sands. Ezra and Nehemiah are devoting their consecrated energy to resuscitating an ideal that belongs to the past. They are outside the wider hope, which breathes not from the histories but from the prophetic literature of their people: the hope by which the fall of Israel as an organized people grows into a vision of a larger Israel, made not by exclusive weeding of its ranks, but by gathering in the nations, in hope of a Messiah in whom all peoples of the earth should be blessed" (Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 1385-1387). The difference between Moulton's relationship to these frictions in the Hebrew Bible and the frictions he finds within the gospels stands in a longer tradition of Christian reading that sees textual problems in first testament as a sign of the need for the second, but does not extend that same treatment to similar literary frictions in the narration of the life and death of Jesus.

Moulton's Literary Guides to the Bible

After the publication of *The Modern Reader's Bible,* Moulton went on to publish a variety of different literary guides to the Bible, including *The Literary Study of the Bible* and *The Bible at a Single View.*[114] These texts extended the work of Moulton's Bible by providing additional tools and practical aids for readers who wanted to read the Bible as a literary text. These latter guides echo many of the concerns Moulton addresses in the introduction to *The Modern Reader's Bible*—repeating his disparaging remarks about standard biblical typography, for example, and insisting that "the Bible is the worst-printed book in the world."[115] But these secondary texts also include a more extensive engagement with the particular set of interpretive obstacles higher criticism presents to the true literary form of the Bible.

"The literary element is in danger of being overpowered by other interests," Moulton writes in *The Literary Study of the Bible*, and again—he has in mind the popularity of the higher critical approach to Biblical interpretation.[116] Moulton distinguishes his own reading from that of critics like Wellhausen, claiming, "the Higher Criticism is mainly a historical analysis; I confine myself to literary investigation." He goes on to explain this division in a way that closely resembles the taxonomy of interpretive labors we find in the prefaces to many modern literary guides to the Bible. Moulton claims that his approach to the Bible simply reads the text itself—what appears on the page—in contrast to "historical" biblical scholarship that seeks to look *behind* the text. "By the literary treatment I understand the discussion of *what* we have in the books of Scripture;" Moulton writes, while by contrast adding: "the historical analysis goes behind this to the further question of *how* these books have reached their present form."[117]

Moulton makes a case for excluding historical questions from the literary study of the Bible on pragmatic as well as hermeneutic grounds. First, Moulton claims that while historical analysis divides the Bible's readers into opposing and hostile camps, literary study brings diverse theological

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[114] Richard Green Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: an Account of The Leading Forms of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings, Intended for English Readers* (London: Isbister and Company, Ltd, 1896). I will be taking the majority of my quotations from this second, slightly amended version of the preface to *The Literary Study of the Bible* and so my citation of page numbers from this text's preface will refer to this second edition.

[115] Moulton writes, "The Bible is the worst-printed book in the world. No other monument of ancient or modern literature suffers the fate of being put to us in a form that makes it impossible, without strong effort and considerable training, to take in elements of literary structure which in all other books are conveyed directly to the eye in a manner impossible to mistake" (Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, 45).

[116] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible,* (1896), iii.

[117] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, (1896), iv.

perspectives together, providing "a common ground upon which opposing schools may meet."[118] Secondly, Moulton argues that historical questions about the composition of the text have *no real bearing* on the work of literary interpretation.[119] Citing scholarly debates over the original context of Deuteronomy's composition—whether this text was indeed composed by Moses or composed much later, during the exile in Babylon—Moulton writes: "I do not see how either of these opinions, if true…can possibly affect the question with which I desire to interest the reader, namely, the structure of Deuteronomy as it stands."[120] In other words, it is the final form of the text (without reference to its compositional context or process) that stands as the true object of literary study. Whether Deuteronomy relates the bare facts of history or is instead a pious fiction of a later age is cast outside the proper domain of literary interpretation.

Moulton explains this division of labors by means of what he sees as the graver implications of certain higher critical claims on the literary appreciation of biblical texts. In higher criticism's election of what it determines to be earlier and later material within the canon (and its corresponding preference for earlier materials as more genuine artifacts), Moulton argues that portions of the Bible deemed to be the product of later ages are consigned to a "lower literary plane," and so become "in a literary sense inferior" to earlier texts.[121]

Not only do higher critical methods implicitly devalue certain portions of biblical literature, but Moulton also worries that they do so with a rather thin understanding of the literary. The interpretive framework behind higher critics' determinations of genuine and "original" materials, for example, may be broadly related to the history of these literary documents, but such determinations are alien and completely anachronistic to the period of the Bible's composition.[122] "Our modern idea of 'originality' has no place;" Moulton writes, "the earliest presentation has no advantage of authenticity over the latest; nor have the later versions necessarily any superiority to the earlier."[123] Comparing debates over authorship and historicity in biblical scholarship to that of similar work in Shakespeare studies, Moulton claims that Shakespeare scholars can still happily sit together in the theater box, coming to a basic agreement about the "literary force" of the plays. Moulton adds:

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[118] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, (1896), iv.
[119] Moulton makes this case in slightly stronger terms than modern Bible as Literature scholars, though you can see a tamer version of a claim like this in Robert Alter's chapter on "Composite Artistry" in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 163-192).
[120] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, v.
[121] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (1896), v.
[122] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, 93.
[123] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (1896), vi.

> It would seem absurd if one of these critics were to interrupt in order to protest that the passage just commenced by the actor was not Shakespeare's, or that recent discoveries in Spanish state papers had shown the motive assigned in the play to Henry's foreign policy to be incorrect, and if actors and audience, in the interests of accuracy, agreed to suspend the performance until the questions could be settled.

The play, in other words, is the thing; "diversity of authorship—if such there be—is no bar to literary unity."[124] For the faithful reader, Moulton argues that this higher unity must be greater than the sum of its constituent parts. This unity must draw that reader deeper into a plot that connects poetry to history and law to narrative and yokes together those disparate passages that at first blush appear at enmity.[125] In fact, Moulton claims that training a reader in the art of discovering and thus appreciating higher unities between apparent diversities in biblical literature is "the foundation step in literary study."[126]

Even as they fail to see the higher unity of these texts, higher critical scholars also ignore the lower unities in the text, and the need to distinguish between the various genres at play in the Biblical canon in order to determine the appropriate "laws" for their interpretation—what he begins to refer to as "literary morphology," or the study of the text's forms. He writes:

> Nowhere has literary morphology so important a place as in application to the Sacred Scriptures…centuries of unliterary tradition have so affected the outer surface of Scripture that the successive literary works appear joined together without distinction, until it becomes the hardest of tasks to determine, in the Bible, exactly where one work of literature ends and another begins.[127]

This ignorance of the text's distinct literary forms, Moulton explains, causes higher critics to inappropriately attribute the cause of formal divisions to compositional fissures. "In analyzing the contents of a book of scripture," Moulton writes, "many even of the best critics betray an almost exclusive preoccupation with subject matter, to the neglect of literary form."[128]

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[124] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, 95.
[125] In *The Bible at a Single View,* Moulton writes: "The whole Bible seems to take literary shape as a Drama in two Acts of the Old and New Testament, with Wisdom literature as an Interlude…when to the historic frame of scripture the other literary forms are added, the different parts of the Bible are felt to draw together with the connectedness of a literary plot, the progression from beginning to end has the intensity of a dramatic movement…The dramatic movement of the Bible has for its stage the whole universe, for its period all time; God is the hero of this drama, and its plot is divine providence" (Richard Green Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918], 6-7).
[126] Richard Green Moulton, "Syllabus: The Literary Study of the Bible," (Sheffield: Leader and Sons, 1891), 16.
[127] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, v-vi.
[128] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, (1896), vi.

As an example of this common misstep among higher critical scholars, Moulton cites Wellhausen's reading of a passage from the Book of Micah. Here, Wellhausen attributes a dramatic shift in tone between two verses in the seventh chapter—between verse six: "For son dishonors father, daughter rises up against mother, daughter in-law against mother-in-law—the enemies of a man are the members of his house," and verse seven: "But I will look to the Lord, I will wait on the God of my salvation—my God will hear me"[129]—to a shift in the age of composition between two distinct literary bodies. Between the catalogue of chronic familial tensions in verse six and the narrator's sudden declaration of faith in God in verse seven, "there yawns a century," Wellhausen writes.

Moulton contests Wellhausen's reading and refutes Wellhausen's historical inference by making a large literary inference of his own. Moulton argues, "what really yawns between these verses is simply a change in speakers." Taking an interpretive leap in a different direction, Moulton reclassifies this prophetic text as a drama and assigns verse six to the speech of "The Despairing People" and verse seven to a reply from "The Man of Wisdom."[130] While both interpreters are responding to the same textual friction, trying to explain the conflict between these juxtaposed verses, Moulton argues that his method is preferable to Wellhausen's because it accords with the interpretive posture appropriate to the literary form in which these texts have been found. By interpreting an internal tension in the text as the occasion for a question about the text's composition and redaction, Wellhausen has failed to consider how this tension might signal the text's genre, and has thus forfeited the proper "key" to these texts' interpretation. By way of explanation, Moulton adds: "Whoever may be responsible for the Sacred Scriptures as they stand, these are worthy of examination for their own sake; and the literary study of the Bible brings to bear on these writings a light that comes from ascertaining the exact form they are found to present."[131]

"The Higher Criticism," Moulton concludes, "seems to me in the main a historical analysis. Its allegiance is not to literature, but to Semitic Studies, in which literary questions are interwoven with questions of language and history."[132] While the "complete student," at the end of his or her scholarly formation, will undertake both approaches (literary and historical) in order to properly study the Bible, Moulton claims that the two cannot be taken on simultaneously, "for the whole

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[129] Micah 7:6-7 Translation mine.
[130] See also Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 716.
[131] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, (1896), vi.
[132] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, vi.

method and spirit of the two are in opposition."[133] Indeed, between these two, literary studies "has the first claim" because "the starting point of historical study must be the very existing text"—which is the sole concern of a literary and morphological reading.[134]

Finally, these latter texts reveal another animating force behind the defense against higher critical modes of biblical reading; namely, the desire to submit the Bible not as a more or less reliable historical text, but as a work of classical literature and as a source for "liberal education."[135] In the decades following the publication of his literary Bible, Moulton advanced the argument that the Bible deserves a place within the liberal arts curriculum not merely because the literary virtues of its contents match those of the established classics,[136] but also because it far outstrips their capacities as an instrument of moral formation. "It is one of the curiosities of our civilization that we are content to go for our liberal education to literatures which, morally are at an opposite pole from ourselves." He explains:

> Our hardest social problem being temperance, we study in Greek the glorification of intoxication…our highest politics aim at conserving the arts of peace, our first poetic lessons are in an *Iliad* that cannot be appreciated without a bloodthirsty joy in killing. We seek to form a character in which delicacy and reserve shall be supreme, and at the same time are training our taste in literatures which, if published as English books, would be seized by the police.[137]

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[133] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible,* viii. Indeed, this is a conceit that is taken on by modern higher critics as well, in their attempts to address the perceived superiority of literary critics of the Bible. Joel Baden writes, "One may wonder how practitioners of modern literary criticism have come to view their method as exclusive of the historical approach, rather than as one possible way of interpreting the Bible…Modern literary criticism is a method meant to help us appreciate the bible as literature; that is, a priori as a unity. Source criticism is meant to explain why, historically, such a reading is so difficult…when these methods are forced into confrontation nothing is accomplished, nothing proven; it is as if we are arguing in different languages: a veritable scholarly Tower of Babel" (Joel S. Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 [2009]: 223-224).

[134] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, ix.

[135] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, viii-x.

[136] Indeed, in one text, Moulton cites The Holy Bible as one of five "literary bibles" of world literature (the other four being Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, and various versions of the Faust story. (Moulton, *World Literature and Its Place in General Culture,* 57).

[137] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, ix. This echoes the language of proposals across the span of the nineteenth century to establish the Bible within the curriculum as a counterpoint to the moral woes of other works of literature. One such report, published by the commissioners of education in Ireland wrote that the books presently installed in the curriculum "instead of improving, corrupt the mind, being calculated to incite to lawless and profligate adventure, to cherish superstition and to lead to dissension and disloyalty" while the Bible would "form the best preparation" for principles of duty, faith and "sound conduct" ("The Fourteenth Report of the Commissioners of Education in Ireland," iii-iv, quoted by David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature Volume 2: From 1700 to the Present day* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 262-263.)

The current canon of Western literature fails to apprentice its young students to the virtues of the moral life, which is its true aim. Moulton writes, "our school and college curricula will not have shaken off their medieval narrowness and renaissance paganism until Classical and Biblical literatures stand side by side as sources of our highest culture."[138] He adds, "Whatever position, then, individual readers may hold as to the spiritual questions entering into the sacred scriptures, we must all be as one in reverence for our great literary heritage. He who is content to leave the Bible unstudied stands convicted as a half-educated man."[139] The proper posture toward these texts is the form of reverence we afford the great classics. Literary reading is the "natural sense of the text," Moulton argues, and so ought to precede all other forms of textual inquiry.[140]

In one of his later texts, *The Bible at a Single View,* Moulton explores how the various smaller unities he sees in the literary forms dispersed across the Bible can be united under the Bible's wider genre, which Moulton identifies as an "autobiography." Reading the Bible as a long autobiography would account for the late composition of the text, long after the events it describes ("the framework would have been made at the close of life"[141]), and for its eternal quality ("unalterable after it has left the hands of its author").[142] The Bible is "not the autobiography of an individual, not exactly that of a nation" Moulton explains, "but the autobiography of a spiritual evolution," an autobiography that constitutes, in the words of the apostle Jude, a "faith once for all delivered to the saints."[143]

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[138] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible,* xiii. To this Moulton adds, "It is surely good that our youth, during the formative period, should have displayed to them, in a literary dress as brilliant as that of Greek literature—in lyrics which Pindar cannot surpass, in rhetoric as forcible as that of Demosthenes, or contemplative prose not inferior to Plato's—a people dominated by an utter passion for righteousness, a people whom ideas of purity, of infinite good, of universal order, of faith in the irresistible downfall of all moral evil, moved to a poetic passion as fervid, and speech as musical as when Sappho sang of love or Aeschylus thundered his deep notes of destiny."

[139] Richard Green Moulton, *World Literature and its Place in General Culture* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 98.

[140] Moulton goes so far as to argue that while the Bible appears to be principally historical writing, "closer inspection shows that what the Bible contains of history is historic framework, that serves to hold together other kinds of literature, such as story, song, discourse, drama, philosophy, epistles. These other kinds of literature, sometimes called the higher literary forms, contain the real message of scripture" (Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View,* 2).

[141] Moulton writes, "For in the case of an autobiography, no one supposes that the chapter on the hero's childhood was written by him when he was a child; or that the chapter on his marriage, the chapter on his entrance upon a business career, would be written during his honeymoon or his apprenticeship. Presumably, the man would be advanced in years before he would conceive the idea of writing his autobiography. As an elderly man he would describe his childhood, but would introduce into the description, but would introduce into the description some writings of his boyish years, with their nursery language and delightful misspellings. As an elderly man he would tell of his marriage, but would illustrate the narrative with a selection of love letters, he would support the story of his business career with documents of appropriate dates. The framework of the whole would have been made at the close of life…in the same way the Bible may be conceived as an autobiography" (Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View,* 3-4).

[142] Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View,* 3-4.

[143] Moulton, *The Bible at a Single View,* 4.

Like Jude, Moulton found himself arguing for decades against those readers who "blaspheme against all that they do not understand."[144] Centuries of poor printing and the recent rash of historical inquiries into the minute particulars of the Bible's composition had caused serious, though not irreparable damage to what Moulton believed was the original form in which these texts were meant to be read. He explains: "Literature, holding truth in solution, not precipitated into system nor interrupted by analysis, is the most powerful medium for the spiritual;" but it only retains that power when we receive it as it has been given—seeing not fissures and cracks in the composition, but a sublime unity of both form and content.[145] As Moulton advises in an appendix at the end of *The Modern Reader's Bible*, "no principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole."[146]

V. Conclusion

While Moulton's biblical scholarship is marked by a search for literary unity over and against the higher critical preoccupation with compositional diversity and textual fragmentation, there were moments earlier in his scholarly career in which Moulton paid more attention to textual difficulties, seeing a potential for such difficulties to provide a kind of interpretive map toward richer understandings of literary objects. In an address Moulton made during the meetings of the New Shakespeare Society some time before he began his career in the study of biblical literature, he listed, among his canons of character interpretation, a rule concerning the interpretation of apparent incoherencies. Moulton notes:

> Difficulties in interpretation may diminish by multiplying. This is only one application of a paradox that is useful throughout all criticism; whatever may be the thing which an observer is seeking to read into harmony, he will often find that, where a single inconsistency is a stumbling block, many inconsistencies resolve themselves into a new consistency. The sense of difficulty is produced in our mind by a sudden variation from what we call "nature." If we mean by nature experience, it must be admitted that distance from ordinary experience, as well as closeness to it, is an element of effect: the two simply distinguish two species in art. A detail in a play will be 'natural' if it is in harmony with its surroundings. These surroundings have to be collected by us from a consideration of the whole play, and what presents itself at

[144] Jude 10.
[145] Moulton, *The Bible in a Single View,* 1.
[146] Moulton, *The Modern Literary Bible*, 1718.

> first as a difficulty may be really a valuable note, pointing to some slight remoteness from ordinary life which characterizes the play as a whole.[147]

Here, Moulton was speaking about Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—about the way that the peculiarities of this play gradually layer their effects upon the audience until the peculiarities become "natural" by the play's own standards, until it becomes clear that this play belongs in a world far from the one that is natural and familiar to its ordinary observer.[148] Whereas the difficulties that arise in the normal course of literary interpretation appear to be obstacles in the comprehension of the whole, these divergences can also be instructive—demonstrating, in their deviance from the audience's expectation, the need for a new interpretive frame.

We see this framework emerging in smaller ways within Moulton's biblical criticism. When he addresses the seeming challenges to the unity of individual Psalms, for example, he claims that the interpretive difficulty of these poems—the fact that they appear as "a series of disconnected sayings"—can signal to this reader the need for a new interpretive frame "other than those with which we are familiar in the literature of the present day."[149]

That said, Moulton does not ultimately frame these hermeneutic difficulties in terms of their potential to open up the field of interpretation or to encourage the reader to recognize these inconsistencies in the work of art as a familiar reminder of the refracted oddities of human perception. Instead, these difficulties narrow interpretation in a new direction, directing a reader to select out of one inductive, determinative framework and into another.

Moulton's hermeneutic commitments came to characterize literary approaches to Biblical texts for the next century. Literary readings of the Bible were cast as a palliative alternative to (or even a necessary deliverance from) the methods of higher criticism—particularly of the division of texts into their putatively "original" constituent sources. Such readings focused on the determination of a given text's genre, and the subsequent determination of the laws for interpretation proper to that genre that would allow a reader to read its contents as a coherent unity. The compositional and

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[147] Richard Moulton, "Mr. Moulton on Some Canons of Interpretation," in *Publications of the New Shakespeare Society* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1887), 126.

[148] Moulton writes, "On a first reading of the *Tempest* it might give a shock to our traditional ideas of maidenly behavior to notice the advances which Miranda makes in her interviews with her lover…any such impression, however, fades away as detail after detail removes the scene of the *Tempest* from the world of our experience…if, however, we examine the play as a whole we see a mass of details, individually not important, but which taken in their entirety remove the field of the story some degrees from the world of reality" (Moulton, "Mr. Moulton on Some Canons of Character-Interpretation, 127-128).

[149] Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible*, 89-90.

artistic unity of the Bible became a functional maxim of its literary readers, who continued to distance themselves from the notions of seams and divisions in biblical literature and from the broader insights of higher critical scholarship.

Literary readings gained further momentum in the twentieth century, popularized by a new generation of critics including Robert Alter, Frank Kermode, Leland Ryken, and J.P. Fokkelman. These critics drew on many of the same principles that animated Moulton's work: an interest in the genre conventions of the ancient world, a desire to equip modern interpreters with the skills to appreciate the Bible as a literary text, and a commitment to literary readings of the Bible as an *alternative* method—often a preferable one—to the standard "scholarly" mode of biblical interpretation offered by higher criticism.[150]

At the same time, drawing on the principles laid out by scholars like Moulton on literary interpretation as an inductive science (ideas further popularized by the New Critics during the postwar period) Christian theologians began to consider literary hermeneutics as a means of vitalizing and stabilizing both biblical exegesis and theological discourse in the twentieth-century.[151] By considering the theological import of these ideas about literary interpretation—the functional autonomy of the literary text (over and against the tyranny of historical criticism or authorial intention) and practices of close reading and resistance "against the heresy of paraphrase"[152]—thinkers from the Jesus Seminar like Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan as well as post-liberal scholars like Hans Frei begin to paint the literary structures of biblical narratives not as an illustration of some independent meaning, doctrine or revelation, but as themselves constitutive of that meaning.[153] The next chapter of the dissertation will explore one branch of this latter movement, focusing on the theological turn toward biblical narrative and its attempts to renegotiate

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[150] There are, of course, exceptions to this larger trend. David Damrosch, for example, offers a literary study of the Bible that uses the insights of higher criticism to "explore the origins and growth of biblical narrative." Damrosch writes, "source study does not deserve its continuing neglect by literary students of the Bible, but, on the contrary, is essential to understanding the dynamics of literary transformation that produced the canonical form of the text…a better understanding of the origins and growth of biblical narrative gives us important assistance in reading the text in its canonical form" (David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987], 1-2).

[151] See Lynn M. Poland, "The New Criticism, Neoorthodoxy, and the New Testament" *The Journal of Religion* 65 (1985) 459-477.

[152] Poland, 467.

[153] See, for example, Robert Funk, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1988); John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1992); Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

biblical authority on similar terms, by utilizing a particular approach to literary reading as a response to the interpretive challenges raised by higher criticism.

Chapter Four | *The Narrative Turn and its Discontents*

If the Bible is a library of books from a variety of different contexts, consisting of sometimes conflicting meanings…the choice between them and the criterion for normative religious meaning among all those that emerge out of the variety of these writings is in human rather than divine hands. The divine authority of the Bible in prescribing belief is possible only if its meaning is the same throughout, if it is essentially clear, and if it is the product of special divine communication rather than the fruit of human understanding.[1]

HANS FREI

[1] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 162.

I. The Turn To Narrative in Christian Theology

Literary readings of the Bible gained momentum in a new field in the latter half of the twentieth century. In tandem with a wider turn toward "narrative" or "story-based" approaches to philosophical reflection,[2] Christian theologians began to revaluate the formal patterns of their own speech. Looking back to the storied origins of their tradition and the storied forms of their own creeds and liturgies,[3] theologians started to speak about "narrative" contexts of belief and "narrative" ethics and, most importantly for our purposes, the Bible's own narrative discourse.

In reaction to a growing sense that the Bible was under threat by higher critical scholars who had transfigured this sacred text into a fragmented and lifeless artifact, theologians began to look for ways to recover a robustly theological approach to biblical interpretation beyond questions about the historicity of this text, or the internal contradictions that made its contents suspect. These theologians appealed to literary studies as a way to recover an appreciation for the form of the Bible, and as a way to recommend attention to its higher unities, rather than the fissures and frictions foregrounded by higher critical scholarship.

While the turn toward biblical narrative in Christian theology has strong genetic ties to the rise of higher criticism in biblical scholarship and the proliferation of literary guides to the Bible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it also emerged in relationship to what was then known as "biblical theology."[4] In the mid-twentieth century, scholars began to consider the differences between contemporary theological reflection and the forms of belief we find in biblical writing, distinguishing the latter from the former in order to make better descriptive claims about the history of the tradition and to consider whether the way the Bible speaks about both God and humanity might serve as a chastening corrective to modern habits of theological speech and reflection.[5]

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[2] See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1981; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[3] Biblical scholar G. Ernest Wright, for example, argued that "a confused and semi-creedless Protestantism" might be best served not by recitations of axiomatic belief, but by forms of theological reflection that are more in line with the storied-form of the creeds we find in the Hebrew Bible, that recount God's election of Abraham and deliverance of his people from the land of Egypt to the land of promise. See G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Books, 1952).

[4] See, for example, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A Sketchbook of Biblical Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* Vols. 1 & 2 trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962).

[5] See Brevard S. Childs, "The Developing of the Discipline of Biblical Theology," in *Biblical Theology in the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3-6.

Scholars of the New Testament began to consider the significance of the parables' literary framework. John Dominic Crossan, for example, argued that the subject matter of Jesus' parables was "irreducible to a prose paraphrase"—particularly the dull moral paraphrase too often proffered by theological interpreters as the true "meaning" of these texts.[6] Other biblical scholars raised related questions about the storied form of biblical creeds—specifically those recited at intervals throughout the Hebrew Bible. Unlike the creeds of contemporary parlance, biblical creeds told stories: memorials of the God who heard the cries of his people and delivered them from slavery in the land of Egypt to the land flowing with milk and honey.[7] Scholars like G. Ernest Wright argued that the story-form of biblical creedal expressions (like the irreducible literary form of the parables) presented a preferable alternative to the reductively systematic impulses of modern theological discourse.[8]

The proponents of the turn toward narrative in Christian theology[9] (often called "narrative theologians," though they go by many names[10]) followed these disparate movements as they began to appropriate narrative interpretation as a conceptual tool. They appropriated this tool to a variety of different ends, with strikingly different conceptions of what narrative is and does, and of the character of its relationship to Christian theology. In some smaller circles—such as the recent turn toward ethnographic studies[11]–theologians turned to narratives for their capacity to foreground the diversity of the tradition, highlighting the slender particulars of individual experience and ecclesial identity as an alternative to an overly schematized or monochromatic account of the Christian faith. But among theologians who began to reflect theologically on the substance and form of biblical narratives, the unity and coherence of the text appeared to be their guiding aesthetic principle. More often than not, theological engagements with biblical narrative were guided by a model of literary reading espoused in a previous generation by literary guides to the Bible—a model that capitalized

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[6] John Dominic Crossan, "Parable as Religious and Poetic Experience," in *The Journal of Religion* 53 (1973): 330-358, 352.
[7] See for example: Exodus 20:2, Leviticus 11:45, Numbers 15:41, Deuteronomy 4:37, Judges 6:9, 1 Samuel 10:18, 1 Kings 8:51, 2 Kings 17:36, Jeremiah 34:13, Micah 6:4.
[8] G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952).
[9] The term "narrative" is chosen carefully here, so as to demonstrate this movement's selective attention to narrative texts over and against other prominent genres of biblical literature (such as legal materials, epistolic writing, poetry and prophecy).
[10] Also known as "Postliberal Theology" or the "Yale School"—though these appellations are more contested. See George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology,* ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42-57.
[11] See *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012); *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian B. Scharen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012); Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott, "Ethnography is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000): 339-364.

on the aesthetic and conceptual unities of these texts, all but ignoring the persistent conflicts between the testimony of their respective narrators.

In the wake of the higher critical turn in biblical scholarship and a series of long and seemingly intractable debates over the nature of biblical authority,[12] theologians like George Lindbeck and Hans Frei looked to models of narrative interpretation as a way for theological discourse to turn back to the Bible with a different form of scholarly rigor. This move was advertised not as a scholarly advance *per se*, but as a return to classical reading practices: a way to see the Bible once more as a coherent ground and norm for theological reflection. Instead of lapsing into an intellectually isolated fundamentalism, reducing the content of these texts to broad generalizations about the truths of human experience or endless speculations about antecedent historical realities, literary interpretation provided stable tools to reach back into history toward what Lindbeck once called "the recovery of what was meant" by biblical narrators.[13] In this way, the turn to narrative was often advanced as a path of breadcrumbs back through the woods, toward a more coherent story of the Christian faith, somewhere in the rose-colored past.[14]

There are, as I mentioned previously, several similarities between the turn toward literary interpretation of the Bible among Christian theologians and the terms by which "literary reading" was advanced by literary guides to the Bible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both employ narrative as a mechanism of synthetic unity. Both use comparison to literary classics as a way to see biblical composition as a high artistic achievement rather than poorly edited agitprop. Both take up the tools of literary reading as a defense against some real or imagined fragmenting force (be that the ongoing menace of higher critical interpretation or the hazy specter of "modernity").[15] Narrative approaches to biblical literature gained traction in theological circles for many of the same reasons that contributed to the success of literary guides to the Bible. By means of narrative interpretation,

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[12] For more on these debates, see Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986); Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[13] George Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation,* ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 176.

[14] Mary Doak makes this point well in *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* where she writes: "When narratives are mentioned in connection with issues of religion and public life…too often they are appealed to as the basis of a restorationist agenda seeking to perpetuate a previously established identity in the face of threats of change. This is an unfortunately truncated use of narrative, since careful attention to the structure and function of narrative suggests that it not only provides and reinforces a communal identity but is also a source of critique and transformation, enabling us to imagine possibilities for the future that are appropriate to the specific historical contexts providing the conditions and the limits of our praxis" (Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* [New York: SUNY Press, 2004], 4).

[15] See Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 237-262.

theologians reoriented scholarly debates about the Bible and revelation, and brought new life to critical conversations that had, from all appearances, "run out of steam."[16] But, as we've seen before, countering the terms of debates over the reliability and authority of biblical literature by championing the unity of this text on literary grounds[17] comes at the expense of accounting for the diversity of the biblical tradition and the conflicts between biblical narrators, leading to the implicit repression of whatever textual elements resist inclusion into a coherent "literary" narrative.

This chapter provides a window onto the current state of theological reflection on the Bible's literary form by sketching the contours of a long conversation in print between a theologian and three of his students about the theological import of the Bible's literary design.[18] I use this conversation to highlight the promise of theological reflection on the literary form of biblical texts while at the same time drawing attention to the limited character of many contemporary appeals to "narrative" or "literary reading" in Christian theology. Part of this conversation—the part where Hans Frei outlines several bold claims about the theological implications of narrative readings of the Bible—is likely familiar to most readers of Christian theology. Less familiar, perhaps, is the part where his students (and even Frei himself) qualify and in some cases walk these claims back, quietly pointing to the failures of coherentist models of narrative interpretation to account for the unresolvable tensions within the biblical canon, and the friction the tradition has preserved between conflicting narrative witnesses. There are two moves in philosophical writing, J.L. Austin once quipped: the part where the author makes her bold claim, and the part where she walks it back.[19] This chapter highlights a similar pattern in theological discourse between multiple generations of writers and thinkers, caught between the obligation to attribute a kind of wholeness to the texts we have called scripture, and the responsibility to account for the diversity of its constituent parts.

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[16] See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248.

[17] In this way, theological appropriation of the literary qualities of the Bible is not unlike that of literary readers, who used aesthetic studies of the text to lend it new life and value. As Kathryn Tanner writes: "In contemporary theology it is not unusual for Christian claims about the universal and permanent pertinence of Scripture to draw upon theories of literary value for support" (Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," *Modern Theology* 14 [1998]: 279-298, 279).

[18] Edward T. Oakes calls the wide range of sub-disciplines that have adopted narrative approaches, "a testimony to the heuristic power of the topic itself…both its power to unify diverse phenomena and its right to legitimate itself as the most fruitful method for reflection on Christian truths" (Edward T. Oakes, "Apologetics and the Pathos of Narrative Theology," *Journal of Religion* 72 [1992]: 37-59; 37.) It should be noted that the wide range of disciplinary subfields that have demonstrated an investment in the term "narrative" may indicate, as Ronald Grimes argues, that the term "theology" is too narrow to cover the broader and more variegated applications of "narrative" or "story" in the study of religion (Ronald L. Grimes, "Of Words the Speaker, of Deeds the Doer," *The Journal of Religion* 66 [1986], 2).

[19] J.L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers of J.L. Austin*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 220-239, 228.

In the first half of this chapter, I consider the promise of theological engagement with the literary form of biblical narratives alongside the ongoing attraction of one particular application of literary reading. Using the work of one the most prominent voices in the narrative turn to theological reflection—Hans Frei—I examine how the narrative coherence of scripture (rather than its textual plurality or the hermeneutic frictions between adjacent, divergent texts) was given the upper hand in conversations about how the language of the Bible might chasten a correlate form of theological speech.[20]

I then turn in the second half of this chapter to those who followed Frei, building on his insights about the relationship of narrative (and specifically biblical narrative) to Christian theology, even as they contested some of the limits of Frei's hermeneutic proposals. Using the work of Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher and Kathryn Tanner, I foreground a quiet discontent among Frei's readers.[21] In early essays and suggestive asides, these theologians mark the need for theological treatments of biblical narrative to move beyond their unifying work, beyond aesthetic understandings of a unified "gospel story" toward the pluralities, diversities and ambiguities of the biblical canon.

While a turn toward the unifying capacities of literary reading might have proved salutary for theological engagements with the Bible in the last century, it may now be time to consider the operative function of narrative in theological speech, to clarify what it is we mean when we talk about "narrative" readings of the Bible. Making intelligible connections between disparate pieces of a text, or disparate elements of time or experience is one thing that a narrative does, but it is not the only thing. In fact, many good narratives serve to remind us that discerning the nature of these connections is incredibly difficult, and that our best attempts at judgment are often skewed and fallible. Too often, theological engagement with biblical narrative tends toward the former capacities of narrative interpretation and yields a unified and all encompassing "gospel story," gleaned from a variety of diverse texts, but parsed in the unified, authoritative singular.[22] This chapter narrates the

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[20] Frei scholars have complained that his readers are all too often guilty of "allowing the tail of Frei's hermeneutical approach to Jesus' identity to wag the dog of his Christological convictions" (Joshua B. Davis, "Introduction," to *The Identity of Jesus Christ* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2013], xxiii-xxiv). I hope that, given the scope of my own project, such scholars can forgive the imbalanced weight of my attentions to the dog's tail in this particular case.

[21] Hauerwas, Placher and Tanner each studied under Frei at Yale Divinity School (Hauerwas in the 60s, Placher in the 70s and Tanner in the 80s).

[22] William Placher notes the implicit commitment of scholars like George Lindbeck, Hans Frei or Stanley Hauerwas to speak about the "gospel" or the "gospel story" in the singular. William C. Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 144-163, 146. For more on this commitment to "the metaphysically generalized singular," see also Grimes, "Of Words the Speaker, Of Deeds the Doer."

way that literary readings of scripture came into use in Christian theology while pointing to an oft-repeated refrain among these theologians about the insufficiencies of this interpretive model, marking the yet unfinished tasks of theological reflection on biblical narrative.

II. Hans Frei

Introduction

Hans Frei was one of the founding figures of the narrative turn in Christian thought,[23] best known for drawing a suggestive line between fractures in modern theology and a significant lapse (or "eclipse") in modern biblical interpretation. In Frei's telling, a wide gap emerged in biblical interpretation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—a gap between the literary particulars of biblical narratives and our sense of their respective meaning.[24] Interpreters of various stripes sought to close that hermeneutic distance by relocating the ostensive referent of these narratives, securing the meaning of these texts in the antecedent reality of historical personages or events, or in generalizable moral or theological principles.[25] In the wake of these hermeneutic shifts, modern theology (and modern biblical scholarship) turned away from the autonomous reality of biblical narratives and forfeited the "realistic" reading practices of their predecessors and the recognition that *what* biblical texts narrate is inextricably imbedded in *how* biblical texts narrate. Frei argued that the only way to remedy these modern interpretive confusions is to return to the long-neglected formal structure and literary design of biblical narratives. The "narrative shape" of these texts is the best map to biblical interpretation: it supplies a way to distinguish better from worse readings, and an assurance of the tradition's interpretive stability over time.

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[23] Like so many of the central voices in this movement, Frei worked to carefully distinguish his own work from certain manifestations of the theological turn toward narrative. In one essay, Frei differentiates himself from the theological impulses of "story theology"—a movement he identifies with the endless symbol-making of a modern Liberalism that is always trying to ground divine truth in human experience (See Hans Frei, "On Interpreting the Christian Story: The 10th Annual Greenhoe Lectureship, 1976," in *Unpublished Pieces: Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School Archive,* ed. Mike Higton (1998-2004), 42-63).

[24] By citing certain properties of biblical narrative, Frei is referring both to the narrative portions of scripture (as distinct from legal, prophetic or poetic materials), but also to the whole of scripture—the "cumulative story" that draws together all the smaller component parts in each of the two testaments—a cumulative story made possible by "figurative reading" (Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* 2).

[25] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 5. Frei's project sets itself up against two prominent alternatives: higher critics, on the one hand, and liberal theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher or Rudolf Bultmann on the other.

Although he was certainly less prolific than many of his contemporaries, publishing only two monographs over the course of his career,[26] Frei's two books—*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*—made a lasting impact on the fields of both biblical hermeneutics and Christian theology and remain classics to this day.[27] Frei drew the attention of constructive theologians back to the text, using the tools of literary study to provide new guidance and direction for theological reflection on biblical narrative. Those who continue the work of theological reflection on the literary properties of biblical narratives stand in many respects on Frei's broad shoulders, benefitting from the rich intellectual history and suggestive hermeneutic proposals he has left his students and readers as an inheritance.

Even still, we might see in Frei's proposal reasons to amend the particulars of his method and to recognize the limits of his own literary attention. While there are merits (and timely ones at that) to utilizing literary modes of interpretation as a means of drawing out the deep integrities of the biblical canon, an honest regard for the literary form of scripture cannot ultimately keep the hermeneutic friction the texts preserves in the conflict between its narrators at bay. To take Frei's proposal about the theological import of the text's literary form seriously, his readers must go beyond him, as indeed his students did in their attempts to work out the theological significance of the Bible's internal literary tensions.

While Frei is perhaps best known for the diagnostic intellectual history he provides in his first book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, in this chapter, I focus on the remedial prescriptions for biblical interpretation he outlines in *The Identity of Jesus Christ,*[28] as well two kindred essays ("Remarks in Connection with A Theological Proposal" and "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus'

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[26] Frei's third major work, *The Types of Christian Theology,* was published posthumously by colleagues who organized the manuscripts of a work that was still in progress when Frei passed away in 1988 (Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992]).

[27] John Woolverton compares the impact of Frei's two monographs with that of Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus,* claiming they "mark a major watershed in the history of biblical studies and Christian theology. After the appearance of Schweitzer's *Quest* and Frei's *Eclipse* no one seriously interested in the principles and procedures of biblical interpretation could ignore them. Both studies pointed to shortcomings of previous generations; both sounded the tocsin at the end of an era; and both dramatically championed a fresh approach to Christian scripture" (John F. Woolverton, "Hans W. Frei in Context: A Theological and Historical Memoir," *Anglican Theological Review* 79 [1997]: 369-393.

[28] *The Identity of Jesus Christ* was actually originally published before *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1967 as a smaller series entitled "The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ" for *Crossroads*—an adult education magazine for the Presbyterian church (Hans Frei, "The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ," *Crossroads* 17/1 [January-March 1967], 69-96 and 17/2 [April-June 1967], 69-96).

Death and Resurrection"[29]) which clarify and refine the hermeneutic[30] proposals of this second text.[31] While Frei's engagement with the gospel narratives goes far beyond the exegetical exercise he sets as his aim,[32] for the purposes of this chapter, I limit my analysis to Frei's theory of the relationship of biblical narrative to dogmatic theology, as well as the application of that theory in his interpretation of the gospels (in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* and the two essays mentioned above) in order to draw out the virtues as well as the limitations of Frei's narrative project. I will begin by discussing Frei's account of "realistic narrative" and its relationship to Christian theology before turning to the exegetical experiments that work out the functional particulars of his hypotheses in Frei's treatment of the gospel texts.

Barth, History and Realistic Reading

In *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* Frei takes up where *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* left off, providing concrete recommendations for the "realistic" reading of biblical narratives.[33] Frei develops his understanding of narrative realism (and specifically the form of narrative realism we find in the gospels) in conversation with thinkers in diverse fields, drawing on interpretive principles taken

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[29] Hans Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," and "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," in *Theology and Narrative*: *Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[30] The subtitle of Frei's second text reads "The Hermeneutic Bases of Dogmatic Theology." In the preface of this text, he defines hermeneutics over and against the fashionable forms of linguistic phenomena with which this term was associated at the time of his text's publication. Instead, Frei defines hermeneutics "in the old-fashioned, rather narrow, and low-keyed manner as the rules and principles for determining the sense of written texts, or the rules and principles governing exegesis" (Frei, "Preface" to *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* 13).

[31] Literary critic Leslie Brisman once remarked that Frei's *Eclipse* "makes so incisive an argument that the reader of this book alone feels a disease has been discovered and not treated…amid the multiplicity of the paths of error there are nonetheless intimations of what ought to be and we are impelled to the second book" (Leslie Brisman, Review of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Modern Theology* in *Comparative Literature* 28 [1976], 368-372, 369). Frei himself claims, in the introduction to his second book "In the instance of narrative interpretation the exegetical practice is indispensible to the theory of exegesis" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 12-13).

[32] Indeed, *The Identity of Christ* also contains a rich discussion of what we mean when we speak about the identity of Christ, and the relationship of that identity to the notion of Christ's presence—these elements of the text, though certainly related to Frei's exegetical work and presented in many ways as the aim of his exegetical exercises, stand beyond the scope of this particular discussion. Additionally, Frei himself disavowed some of his emphasis on "presence" within this text, claiming that it was "deeply implicated in the twin dangers of mystification and of loss of morality to religion, which result from making personal acquaintance or personal knowledge the model for what transpires between God and humanity in religion or Christian faith" (Hans Frei, Preface to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 4).

[33] It is important to note that Frei does not understand his hermeneutic proposal as innovative or novel, but instead takes it to be a return to a classical form of reading and interpretation that has been "eclipsed" in the modern period.

from the New Criticism,[34] the ordinary language philosophy of thinkers like Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein,[35] and Erich Auerbach's account of realism as a distinct literary tradition.[36] But arguably the most significant influence on Frei's approach to biblical narrative derives from the subject of his doctoral dissertation: Swiss theologian Karl Barth.

In the preface to *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* Frei identifies Barth's theological hermeneutics as "a model of the kind of narrative reading that can be done in the wake of the changes I describe in this book."[37] Barth reframed debates about the "reality" or veracity of biblical narratives by challenging conventional distinctions between "historical" and "fictional" materials and their accompanying modes of interpretation. In an exegetical aside in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, for example, Barth provides a "short hermeneutical observation" that would later inform Frei's work on the literary form of the gospel narratives. Here, Barth acknowledges the various interlocking genres of writing found in the narrative of the spies sent ahead into the promised land in Numbers 13-14 and considers the significance of these various literary genres for the interpretation of this text. Barth writes:

> The term "history" [*Historie*] is understood in its earlier, naïve significance in which it is neutral, irrespective of the distinctions between that which can be historically demonstrated, that which has the character of saga and that which has been consciously fashioned. "Fictional" [*Erfundenen*] denotes an account which is received and recorded in a definite kerygmatic sense. In relation to the biblical histories we can, of course, ask about the distinctions (between these literary forms) and even make them hypothetically. But if we do so we will surely miss the kerygmatic sense in which they are told and made definite and

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[34] Though Frei develops his account of realistic narrative in relationship to analogous genres (most notably the nineteenth century novel), as he was later distancing himself from New Criticism, he claimed that he did not intend for his reflections about the realistic narratives found in the gospels to be taken as participating in a wider genre category of "realistic narrative." He once wrote, "There may or may not be a class called 'realistic narrative,' but to take it as a general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives and their partial second-order redescriptions in the doctrine of the Incarnation are a dependent instance is first to put the part before the horse and then cut the lines and claim that the vehicle is self-propelled" (Frei, "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative, 142-143).

[35] See Jason A. Springs, "Between Barth and Wittgenstein," in *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41-62; John Allan Knight, "Wittgenstein's Web: Hans Frei and the Meaning of Biblical Narratives," *Journal of Religion* 95 (2015): 337-360.

[36] Auerbach's development of realism as a distinctive literary tradition presented Frei with a substantive reconsideration on the grounds of genre of the relationship of realistic narrative to questions of historical authenticity. Narrative realism offers the reader its own form of reality, independent from historical questions in that it "exists for itself, contains nothing but itself." While his first historical example of this form of narrative realism is Homeric literature, Auerbach argues that biblical narrative presents an even stronger version of this autonomous reality in that biblical stories aim to subject their reader to an alternative reality that is, after all "the only real world" (Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953], 13, 15).

[37] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, viii.

> authoritative. To do justice to this sense, we must not ask at all concerning these distinctions, or, after asking for them, cease to do so. In other words, we must still, or again, read these histories naively in their unity and totality. It is then and only then that they can say what they are trying to say.[38]

Barth explains that these various modes of biblical narration (saga, history, fiction) are all component parts of the Bible's *kergymatic* witness to history, and must for this reason be read "in their unity and totality."[39] For Barth, the Bible's narrative material is "realistic" not by virtue of its resemblance or conformity with the world we've known,[40] but by its capacity to describe a world that is *more* real, and *more* true—"the one common world in which we all live and move and have our being."[41]

Barth's reformulation of the historical questions long posed to the biblical canon gave Frei tools to move beyond the stale terms of the exegetical debates of his time without turning the Bible into a source for historical reconstruction and without receding into a purely symbolic reading of biblical narratives.[42] Barth redirected readers' attention to the *form* of the text as a hermeneutic guide:

> The universal rule of interpretation is that a text can be read and understood and expounded only with reference to and in light of its theme…the relationship between theme and text

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[38] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, trans. G.W. Bromiley, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 478-479. Translation adapted from the German.

[39] For Barth, there is a significant difference between "Historie" and "Geschichte"—the former is associated with that which can be verified by the objective, neutral observer, and the latter with the synthetic work of art—communicating truths that are inflected by the meaning of God's revelation in history. See Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the* Römerbrief *Period* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 95-124.

[40] Hans Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism," Lecture for the Karl Barth Society of North America, Toronto. Spring 1974 in *Hans W. Frei Unpublished Pieces: Transcripts from the Yale Divinity School Archive,* ed Mike Higton, http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Freitranscripts/Freicomplete.pdf, 31. Frei picks up this point about the real world presented by the Bible earlier in this same essay, as he writes about the development in Barth's thought about the *anschaulich* quality of human intuition with respect to certain objects of thought. Frei claims that the early Barth imagined human creatures as *anschaulich* to themselves, such that God was entirely *unanschaulich* to them, the later Barth flips these terms (from *CD* II onward): "The reality of our history with God is *so real,* it is *so much the one real world in which we live* that what is *anschualich* to us is really that: our life with God—to such an extent that we are not really *anschualich* to ourselves. We do not know, do not grasp ourselves" (Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative," 30-31).

[41] Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative," 36; Frei, "Eberhard Busch's Biography of Karl Barth," in *Types of Christian Theology*, 161.

[42] In a lecture given on the occasion on Barth's death, Frei wrote, "For Barth, the Bible was, in a manner, Virgil and Beatrice in one. The Guide who took him only to the threshold of Paradise, it was at the same time the *figura* in writing of that greatest wonder which is the fulfillment of all natural, historical being without detracting from it: The incarnate reconciliation between God and man that is Jesus Christ. He is not the incarnate Lord who, as a separable or added action, performs and undergoes the reconciliation of god and man. He *is* the reconciliation he enacts" (Hans Frei, "Karl Barth: Theologian," in *Theology and Narrative*, 169).

> must be accepted as essential and indissoluble. The form cannot therefore be separated from the content, and there can be no consideration of the content apart from the form.[43]

For Barth, modern readers are too often guided by exegetical approaches to the Bible that depart in key respects from the guiding features of its form. These readers "read the canon differently from what it is intended to be and can be read."[44] The canon's intention in Barth's understanding has one clear purpose: "The object of the biblical texts is quite simply the name Jesus Christ, and these texts can be understood only when understood and determined by this object."[45]

By one reading, we might see Frei's theological engagement with biblical narratives as an attempt to further concretize Barth's hermeneutic model. Taking up Barth's insights about the relationship between the form and content of biblical literature, Frei develops a model of aesthetic interpretation that points "simply to the story itself," and more specifically to the story of Jesus, demonstrating the priority of the text over any contingent hermeneutic framework.[46] Frei's proposal also offers one account of *how* the Bible might render the identity of Jesus accessible to its reader, grounding Barth's theological claims about the real witness of the Bible in the formal literary properties of biblical narratives (and in particular of the gospels' description of the identity of Jesus Christ).[47] But in localizing the revelatory capacities of scripture in its literary form, Frei stabilizes Barth's account of revelation, and so departs from Barth's understanding of revelation as a free act of God, who stirs at his will the human words of scripture "like the water in the Pool of Bethesda" so that they might become present for readers as the Word of God.[48] While Barth worried about a theology of scripture that rendered revelation a possession of the text's readers,[49] Frei worried about relativizing the form and contents of the texts themselves, leading to what he calls in his dissertation an "epistemological monophysitism," in which the particularity of biblical narratives, and specifically the carefully narrated details of Jesus' fleshly life do little to shape or inform our Christological reflection.[50]

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[43] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 493.
[44] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 493.
[45] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 727.
[46] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 41.
[47] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 13
[48] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 530.
[49] For a more thorough treatment of Karl Barth's theology of scripture, see Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is In Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent E. Bacote, Laura C. Miguelez, Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 55-75.
[50] See Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (London: T & T Clark International Press, 2004)*;* Kathryn Sondregger, "Epistemological Monophysitism in Karl Barth and Hans Frei," *Pro Ecclesia* 22 (2013): 255-

In conversation with Barth's account of both revelation and the "historical" nature of the Bible, Frei develops an account of "realistic narrative" in biblical literature—offering in his first book a diagnostic history of its eclipse in the landscape of modern biblical interpretation, and in his second, concrete tools by which a reader might recover those long-lost modes of reading best suited to its literary form.

Aesthetic Understanding and Normative Interpretation

In order to interpret the Bible's realistic narratives properly, Frei writes that modern readers must revisit the "history-like" character of these texts (which is not the same as their historical veracity or reliability[51]). He explains,

> Whether or not these stories report history (either reliably or unreliably), whether or not the Gospels are other things besides realistic stories, what they tell us is a fruit of the stories themselves. We cannot have what they are about (the "subject matter") without the stories themselves. They are history-like precisely because like history-writing and the traditional novel and unlike myths and allegories they literally mean what they say. There is no gap between representation and what is represented by it.[52]

Contrary to the forms of reading advanced by higher critical scholarship, the meaning of realistic narratives cannot be located behind texts, in some external history or factual referent. Nor is this meaning located in some isolable principle about human existence or some doctrinal claim we might extract from a text we could then just as easily dispose of. Instead, the meaning of history-like narratives is "a function of the specific storied representation."[53] "We cannot have what they are

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262. While Frei was well-aware of the dangers Barth saw in attempts of scholars like Schleiermacher to connect the realities of faith and history too closely—he worried, in Higton's helpful and clarifying words, that "in the rejection of those attempts, at least the danger of a failure to find theological room for the fully historical humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, and more generally for a genuinely historical conformity of human beings to God." On these terms, Frei worried that "Jesus' humanity…could only be relevant as the percussion point of God's revelation, as the blackening of history around God's lightning bold, as a void which was a negative indicator of the miracle of God's word" (Higton, *Christ, Providence and History,* 40, 54-55).

[51] According to Frei, higher critics were too often seduced by the history-like quality of biblical narratives into the unfounded assumption that these narratives presented themselves as reliable historical reports that could be independently verified. For more on this see Lynn Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 11-46.

[52] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 11-12

[53] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* 181. Frei clarifies this point in the introduction to *The Identity of Jesus Christ:* "Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, and at an accelerating pace with the development of historical criticism, this coincidence of the story's literal or realistic depiction with its meaning has been taken to be the same thing as the claim that the depiction is an accurate report of actual historical facts. This identification of two different things is a classic

about (the "subject matter") without the stories themselves," Frei writes—they are not meaningless reports of some meaningful occurrence that stands behind them.[54] To read realistic narratives well, a reader must attend to the particulars of their storied representation in order to arrive at what Frei terms *aesthetic understanding*.[55]

For Frei, an "aesthetic understanding" of biblical narratives provides a stabilizing norm for the Christian tradition. Frei writes, "At the beginning of the twentieth century we had a debate about the essence of Christianity, and we are ripe for it again."[56] The essence of Christianity should not be established in the fashionable anthropological[57] or apologetic[58] form of the last centuries (lest the substance of faith depend on the verification of its validity in human experience, or lest it change from generation to generation).[59] Instead, Frei claims that we ought to begin such an inquiry by asking, "what is it to understand Christianity?" in such a way that "understanding" is removed as far as possible from the contingent perspective of the individual interpreter (which can never offer a stable "essence" of Christian faith).[60] This form of understanding ought instead to be secured *hermeneutically*, Frei explains, by locating it in the formal, aesthetic structure of biblical narratives.[61] These aesthetic structures provide a metric for faithful reading as well as an answer to the age-old

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instance of a category error. No matter what gave rise to this confusion, its consequences for biblical interpretation have been momentous" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 12).

[54] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 11.

[55] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 32. Of course, the question of reference cannot be completely avoided, but this question is logically *subsequent* in Frei's estimation to the question of how the formal structure of the gospel narratives render the identity of Jesus, such that the direction of revelation and interpretation always moves, in the words of Paul DeHart "from text to world" (Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses*: *The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* [Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2006], 127).

[56] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 31.

[57] For more on Frei's objections to anthropologically-oriented theologies, see Frei's critical treatment of Feuerbach (Hans Frei, "Feuerbach and Theology," *Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 35 [1967]: 250-256).

[58] Frei writes, "a sound basis for good dogmatic theology demands that a sharp distinction be observed between dogmatic theology and apologetics" (Frei, "Preface" to *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* 7).

[59] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 27-30. Frei writes, "We have lived for almost three hundred years in an era in which an anthropologically oriented theological apologetic has tried to demonstrate that the notion of a unique divine revelation in Jesus Christ is one whose meaning and possibility are reflected in general human experience" (Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 30).

[60] Frei writes, "My plea here…involves a search, in deliberate opposition to most of what I find in contemporary theology, for categories of understanding detached from the perspectives we bring to our understanding, including our commitments of faith...it involves a search for a notion of understanding that is as little as possible moved by considerations of man's understanding as moved by his being—existential, historical or ontological" (Frei, "Remarks in Consideration with a Theological Proposal," 31)

[61] Frei worries that if readers fail to pay attention to the formal structures that yield this determinate aesthetic understanding "the story seems to mean whatever you want depending on what perspective or modern view of man you happen to come from as you read the story and want to find substantiated there" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* 40).

problem of the ongoing contemporaneity of Christian faith.[62] The formal structure of biblical narratives (like the formal structures of the realistic novel) provide consistent, determinative indices of a narrative's meaning, enabling the possibility of normative interpretation across centuries of diverse reading communities, and therefore the stability of the wider tradition over time.

Drawing on studies of the nineteenth century novel (with frequent reference to George Eliot[63]), Frei supports his theological proposal by means of a heuristic analogue between the interpretation of realistic novels and that of the Bible in order to explain the particulars of his own understanding of "valid" or normative interpretation. Contrasting himself with the familiar paradigm of validity in interpretation exemplified in the writings of E.D. Hirsch, Frei outlines a vision of normative meaning that is based not on a reader's ability to determine the intention of the author,[64] but on the unchanging features of a text's narrative structure.[65] Frei writes, "The formal structure of the narrative itself is the meaning, not the author's intention nor an ontology of language nor yet the text's impact."[66] The narrative structure of biblical stories directs the attentive reader toward a proper understanding of their message,[67] and thus ensures that "the constancy of the meaning of the text is the text and not the similarity of its *effect* on the life-perspectives of succeeding generations."[68]

Frei explains that realistic narrative (in novels as well as in the Bible) depicts "meaning" in terms of the carefully structured unity of character and circumstance, intention and action, subject and social setting, in such a way that the mutual interaction of these elements cannot simply be

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[62] We see this problem animating a variety of thinkers in the modern period, from Soren Kierkegaard's discussions of the relative advantages or disadvantages of the follower at second hand, to Schleiermacher's account of the ongoing redemptive role of the Holy Spirit in the church.

[63] Frei cites two of Eliot's novels—*Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*—as prominent exemplars of the realistic nineteenth century novel and helpful analogues for realistic reading in biblical interpretation (Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 32).

[64] Among Frei's reasons for distancing himself from the form of normative interpretation that depends of the confident establishment of the intention of the author is the implicit encouragement this gives to the modes of exegetical investigation espoused by higher criticism—to use whatever historical, sociological and comparative tools possible to determine "what the author *must* have meant" (See Hans Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations," in *Theology and Narrative*, 102-103).

[65] Frei writes, "Valid interpretation (Hirsch to the contrary) does not depend on the difficult assumption of a necessary and traceable connection between the text and the author's intention or will. On the contrary, precisely this hypothesis and the endeavor to demonstrate its validity leads, in the case of the Gospels, away from normative interpretation into speculative historical inference. Normative interpretation is a matter of the structure of the narrative itself and seeing if the text *as given* has a genuine structure" (Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 33).

[66] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 34.

[67] Here we see strong ties between Frei's hermeneutic theory and the reading principles of New Criticism, though Frei would later distance himself from New Criticism, claiming that these readers turned the incarnation into a general theory of language and meaning. See Hans Frei, "The 'Literal' Reading of Biblical Narrative," in *Theology and Narrative*, 140-143.

[68] Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 32. Frei goes so far as to argue: "no reference to the situation of the interpreter is necessary in understanding the text."

paraphrased or explained. Here Frei cites the oft-quoted quip of Henry James: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"[69] The elements of realistic narrative, in other words, cannot be taken out of context and removed from their relationship to other textual elements without losing an intricate web of carefully narrated relations that are in fact constitutive of these elements' meaning.[70]

In this way, Frei writes that realistic narrative differs from the symbolic characters and circumstances of myth that must be demythologized in order to arrive at their true "meaning"—dissolving their relationship to the vehicle of their representation.[71] Unlike the mythological structure of gnostic texts, the gospel narratives depict a savior who is "completely identical" with a particular human individual—Jesus of Nazareth—whose saving act is inseparable from his person and cannot be explained in purely symbolic terms.[72] The relationship of character and circumstance, intention and action in these realistic narratives cannot be explained, but only *described.*[73] The principal object of such a description, Frei argues, is to "narrate the unity" of these formal elements, such that this description would remain unchanged from reader to reader, and from generation to generation.

Aesthetic Understanding and the Gospel Narrative

Frei tests his hypotheses about the practice and virtues of "realistic reading" in his interpretation of the gospel narratives.[74] By marking out the formal elements of these texts that serve as stable interpretive indices within his hermeneutic paradigm, Frei aims to show how the carefully structured unity of the gospels' literary elements renders the meaning of the text (which in this case

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[69] Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* 69, quoted by Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 97.
[70] See Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 13-14.
[71] Frei provides a definition of myth in "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," as a means of distinguishing the forms of interpretation appropriate to myths and that appropriate to narrative. "Myths are stories in which character and action are not irreducibly themselves. Instead they are representative of broader and not directly representable psychic or cosmic states, states in some sense 'transcending' the scene of finite, particular occurrences" (Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 46-47).
[72] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 72.
[73] Mike Higton explains Frei's point in this way: "In these narratives, the character of Jesus is rendered in large part simply by the description of what he *does*—his intentional action…In response to a narrative that works like this, our primary recourse will be to retell the story of those actions and interactions, perhaps drawing attention to patterns that shape them, but not turning to a different kind of description (the psychological or the epic) as anything other than an aside" (Mike Higton, "Foreword" to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, xiii).
[74] Frei emphasizes again and again that his exegetical theory is to be held with open arms, tested against its exegetical application which "will dictate the success or failure of the enterprise" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 58).

is the identity of Christ) directly accessible to their reader, and accessible in such a way that this meaning can remain stable over time.[75]

Because the formal narrative pattern of the gospels[76] enables a form of aesthetic understanding that is normative, close attention to these patterns prevents (in theory) hermeneutic missteps or unnecessary fractures in the communal interpretation of these texts. It prevents oversimplified readings of the identity of Jesus: readings that prioritize the subjective experience of his presence,[77] the historical reality of his person, or a "single excellence of his character" (i.e. "love") as the key for interpreting his salvific significance.[78] Instead of locating the meaning of Christ in themes that hover above the text or historical realities behind the text, readers should instead pay attention to the carefully orchestrated narrative pattern of the gospels, for "there are stylized elements in the original accounts that cannot be ignored."[79]

These elements—the plot, characterization, dialogue, and narrative arc of the gospels—provide a way of engaging with the identity of Jesus that does not fall into the trap of alienating his person from his public manifestations (such that his identity might lie somewhere behind his actions or speech). Instead, the formal elements of the gospels offer a picture of Jesus as someone who becomes un-substitutably identified[80] through the temporal narration of his movements in the world.[81] By means of the carefully structured unity of Jesus' character and his circumstances, his

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[75] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 13.

[76] It is important to note that at this time Frei took his own hermeneutic proposals about realistic narrative as deriving from the New Testament, and not from some independent interpretive framework, though he would later back away from these arguments, and claim his own approach as the product of a tradition rather than the text itself (Higton, *Christ, Providence and History,* 112).

[77] As in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who connects "the presence of Christ directly with the interior life of the Christian" (Frei, *The Identity of Christ*, 43).

[78] Mike Higton writes that Frei's argument about the form of interpretation appropriate to the gospel narratives subtly "unites Gnostic savior myths, Bultmannian epistemological monophysitism, novelistic Christ figures (at least to the extent that they are taken as Christ figures, rather than as characters in their own right), and nineteenth-century relationalism" and then claims all of these varying approaches to the person of Chist as ultimately insufficient and ultimately "defeated by the Gospels." Higton explains: "All of them had made the same Christological mistake: they took the real meaning of the Gospel accounts, and particularly the transition from cross to resurrection, to be some repeatable content…rather than a specific and contingent concatenation of public circumstances and events. All of them had missed the *history-likeness* of these texts" (Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 99).

[79] Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 52.

[80] Frei writes, "The story told in the Gospels, which became the cornerstone of the Christian tradition of belief, is distinguished from other, parallel accounts by its urgent insistence that the story of salvation is completely and exclusively that of the savior Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee…the pattern of redemptive action exhibited in Jesus is so identical with his personal story that he preempts the pattern. It is his story and cannot be reiterated in full by the story of anybody else" (Frei, "Theological Reflections of the Accounts of Jesus Death and Resurrection," 46).

[81] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 53.

actions and his intentions,[82] the gospels offer a unified picture of the slow emergence of Jesus' identity: moving from ambiguity and mystery in the first portions of the gospel accounts toward the clarity and intelligibility about his person provided in the final sequence of his death and resurrection.[83] In the fullness of narrative time, in the fullness of this carefully structured literary unity of his character, Jesus' humanity as well as his divinity becomes both intelligible and accessible to the readers of these texts.[84] Just as Jesus found a way to communicate transcendent truths by uniting teachings about the Kingdom of God to ordinary language—in wheat, tares, and taxes—the literary unity of the narrators' description of Jesus provides a way for readers to encounter the unity of Jesus' divine and human identities.[85] As Paul DeHart explains, for Frei, "The ontological unity of divine and human as referent is accessed only through the concrete literary unity of the storied Jesus."[86]

Frei's emphasis on unity as an organizing principle for the interpretation of biblical narrative becomes even more pronounced as he sets up the terms for his reading of the gospels.[87] He begins with the telling assumption that we can (and indeed ought) to read the gospel narratives as a composite whole. "If we may take the liberty of treating the synoptic Gospels as one composite account (with individual variations)," Frei writes, "at least one possible sequential arrangement or three-part pattern seems to emerge."[88] Without making a case for why a reader ought to exercise such interpretive liberties, without outlining any principles by which a reader ought to form said composite from four divergent narratives, or further, without explaining why a composite might lend itself better to a close reading of the gospels' narrative structure than attention to the divergences between their variant plots, Frei begins his literary analysis. He proceeds to describe a three-part narrative pattern[89] yielded by a close reading of this imagined composite text.[90]

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[82] Frei writes, "A person's identity is constituted (not simply illustrated) by that intention which he carries into action" (Frei, "Theological Reflections of the Accounts of Jesus Death and Resurrection," 63).
[83] See Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 103-106.
[84] For Frei (as for Barth) God's revelatory acting in Jesus must provide real knowledge for the human knower. Paul DeHart writes that for Frei, this is demonstrated, in part, in the establishment by way of the gospel narratives of a genuine unity between Jesus' as the persona of God and as an individual human—a unity that "lies not in their conceptual ordering within a single theory, but rather (and only) in the written portrait itself, the aesthetic object upon which their interpretations converge" (DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses*, 106).
[85] Frei, "Response to Narrative Theology: an Evangelical Appraisal," in *Theology and Narrative*, 209-210.
[86] DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses*, 127
[87] Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 73.
[88] Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 205.
[89] It is noteworthy that Karl Barth also saw the stages of Jesus' life as a three-part sequence, though Barth's tripartite division falls along a different organizational scheme (dividing the passion from the resurrection in parts two and three and relegating Jesus' teachings and miraculous acts to the first). See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1,* 224-228.

This composite reading of the four gospels is not simply an account of the lowest common denominator of elements that these texts have in common.[91] But nor does it attend to the slender particulars of the individual writers' narrative vision[92] or their divergence from one another.[93] Instead, Frei's narrative pattern is derived almost exclusively from the account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provided by Luke,[94] drawing in material from the other three gospels to support or slightly nuance the tripartite pattern Frei finds in Luke's narrative sequence.[95]

This three-part narrative pattern[96] begins with the birth and infancy of Jesus[97] (a story that is notably given in just two of the four gospels[98]), moves through the years of Jesus' itinerant ministry, and reaches its dramatic climax in his death and resurrection. The third and final stage—the one that Frei claims is the "most clearly history-like"—begins with Jesus' announcement of his return to

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[90] Frei makes a comparison between his own comprehension of the singular "gospel story" and that of reading a work of art: "Reading a story, whether the gospel story or any other, has been rightly compared to understanding a work of visual art, such as a piece of sculpture: We do not try to imagine the inside of it, but let our eyes wander over its surface and its mass, so that we may grasp its form, its proportions, and its balances" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* 96).

[91] Frei writes, "I shall not attempt to evaluate the *historical* reliability of the gospel story of Jesus or argue the unique truth of the story on grounds of a true, factual 'kernel' in it. Instead, I shall be focusing on its character as a story. As for history, I shall take for granted only what most commentators agree upon: that a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the kingdom of God's nearness, did exist and was finally executed" (Frei *The Identity of Jesus Christ,* 63.)

[92] While Frei admits that the writers of the Synoptic Gospels narrate the story of Jesus "from some governing convictions and with some theme or intention in mind," he immediately adds "we cannot with any certainty tell their convictions and intentions apart from the narrative texts…to do so without regard for the narrative pattern would make these convictions as thin and uncommunicative as it is to paraphrase the meaning of a poem or a novel by distilling it out and separating it from its language and imagery or its story and then presenting it in didactic form. We lose the meaning together with the work in that way" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 59-60).

[93] Frei writes that while "the gospel accounts, regarded as a story and taken as one self-contained whole, do provide us with a kind of order-in-sequence consisting of a series of distinct transitions from stage-to-stage…in any piece of literature, the Gospels included, it may be possible to find a variety of such formal ordering schemes, some of which may be in conflict with others." He does not specify further the implications of this potential conflict, or how that might trouble his "unified" vision of the gospel witness (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 130).

[94] Frei admits in an earlier essay the limits of his own aesthetic model—that "one cannot even cover Luke and Mark by the same story analysis"—while still claiming that this "organizing principle is better, i.e., has a wider range of applicability within the New Testament canon, than many another" (Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," 43).

[95] Frei acknowledges this dependence explicitly in a footnote, claiming that Mark's outline also could have been used, though it veils the centrality of the resurrection that is clearer in Luke's account: "The outline to be followed is largely, though not exclusively, that of Luke. The same type of analysis could have been applied if Mark had been used as the focal narrative, though the formal structure of the story is obviously somewhat different. The resurrection is just as indispensible in Mark as in Luke. But whereas it is the climax of the Lukan account and the preparation of Acts, in Mark it is the veiled center toward which the action moves, the open mystery not actually included in the narrative, which nonetheless serves as the narrative's mainspring" (Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 205).

[96] Frei explains that the narrative pattern of the gospels encapsulates four wider patterns: "(1) Jesus' obedience; (2) the coexistence of power and powerlessness; (3) the transition from one to the other: and (4) the interrelation of Jesus' and God's intention and action" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 129).

[97] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 131. In "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection" Frei clarifies that this stage begins with the genealogies and ends with "the transition to the next, Jesus' baptism at the hands of John" (Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 205).

[98] Matthew and Luke are the only gospels to include an account of Jesus' birth, and of the events leading up to it.

Jerusalem and climaxes in the passion and resurrection. While the first two stages of Jesus' earthly life do not give the reader access to the identity of Jesus as a "storied, history-like figure," in Jesus' final days we find a transition in literary styles as "we come closest to historical events in his life."[99]

Oddly enough, the most history-like portion of the gospels is also, by Frei's estimation, the most "fictional."[100] That is, unlike historiography or biography, the gospel writers provide a form of narration in this final section that most closely resembles novelistic discourse by providing insights into the internal states of its characters. By these narrative strategies, Jesus' interior struggle and distress in the Garden of Gethsemane is brought into full view, rendering the fullness of his identity as the one who is obedient to God sharply accessible to the reader. This "cumulative, unbroken" narrative sequence of this final act constitutes what Mike Higton calls the dramatic "enactment of God's climactic intention" in that God's presence becomes embodied and active in the identity of Christ as the one who is obedient to the Father.[101] Frei writes,

> When we see something of that sort, especially if we see it at some climactic stage which recapitulates a long span in a man's life—when we see the loyalty of several hitherto ambiguous strands in his character pruned and ordered in a clear and decisive way at that point—then we are apt to say: "Here he was most of all himself."[102]

Jesus identity is thus fully manifest[103] at the point at which his inner life and the will of the Father comes to outward expression in Jesus' own passion and death.[104] The ambiguity about Jesus identity[105] that marked the first two stages of his life and ministry is conclusively resolved in the account of Jesus' resurrection. Frei writes, "The unity and continuity of the narrative's structure is such—especially in Luke's account—that to leave out the climax furnished by the story of the

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[99] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 144.
[100] Frei clarifies that the fictional quality of the final section of the gospels does not impinge upon their historical witness. Drawing on Erich Auerbach's ideas about the relationship of narrative realism to questions about history, Frei claims that even the reader who does not take the events of the final stages of Jesus' life to be plausibly historical must still see them as something distinct from myth, as "hyperfiction claiming to be self-warranting fact" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 142).
[101] Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 80.
[102] Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 57. Here, we are reminded of a similar claim that Barth makes late in his *Dogmatics*: "the Easter story is the Gospel story in its unity and completeness as the revealed story of redemption" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, 227).
[103] Frei writes, "The identity of Jesus in the accounts before that last and final stage is a matter of ambiguity, but in and after the final sequence it is, as a storied identity, accessible to us" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 153).
[104] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 119.
[105] Frei clarifies that this ambiguity is "undoubtedly, not in the authors' convictions" (Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 74).

resurrection (and even that of the ascension) would mean doing irreparable violence to the literary unity and integrity of the whole account."[106]

These three carefully structured stages, Frei argues, depict the slow emergence of Jesus' identity: from his birth as "a representative person in barely individuated form"[107] to the narration of his death and resurrection, at which point Jesus is depicted in all his fullness as unsubstitutably himself—as the one who was "obedient to the will of God."[108] This obedience, Frei claims, constitutes "the very center of the story." It is "what he does uniquely." Unlike other unifying paradigms for Jesus' identity, such as "love" or "freedom," Jesus' obedience is not hidden away in some internal state, but clearly demonstrated in the gospel writers' narration of Jesus' "moral action moving towards a certain goal."[109] "It is a complex sequence," Frei argues, "but nonetheless a sequence in unity."[110]

Critique and Correction

While the unified tripartite sequence Frei finds in his composite reading of the gospels may do justice to Luke's narrative strategy, it represses elements from the other three gospels that do not fit within this narrative frame. For example, Frei marks the transition between the first and second stage of the gospels' narrative pattern as Jesus' baptism (the event with which Mark's gospel begins). He points to the meaningful juxtaposition of Jesus' baptism with his teaching in the synagogue (a juxtaposition only found in Luke's gospel).[111] Frei fails to interpret (or even mention) the fact that Mark and Matthew place Jesus' controversial teaching in the synagogue much later in his ministry, as a portentous midway point between Jesus' baptism and his arrest.[112]

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[106] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 126.
[107] At his birth (at least as it is depicted in Matthew and Luke), Jesus is narrated in terms of his connection to Israel: determined by genealogical references to Abraham and David and by symbolic references to a miraculous rescue from royal infanticide and a subsequent exodus from Egypt.
[108] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 112. Frei writes "It is striking that, in all four Gospels and in the other writings of the New Testament, it is the motif or quality of obedience that is stressed in regard to the person of Jesus. By contrast, there is, for example, very little mention of his faith."
[109] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 112-113.
[110] Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 210.
[111] "Luke places this emphasis right at the point at which he has Jesus begin his public ministry, just after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. It is worth noting that Luke places the first instance of this bold and thematic announcement, which identifies Jesus wholly by reference to his theme and its embodiment in Jesus' hometown, lending his particular identity a thoroughly bedrock and unsubsitutable quality" (Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 133).
[112] Mark 6:1-6, Matthew 13:54-58

Frei's reading of the gospel narrators' revelation of Jesus' identity in temporal sequence—taking him from ambiguity and mystery toward clarity—also fails to attend to what is arguably the original conclusion of Mark's gospel.[113] While Luke might depict the resurrection as the triumphant finale, wedding the disciples' recognition of the risen Jesus with the opening of their minds at last "to understand the scriptures,"[114] the end of Mark's gospel offers a strikingly different version of these events. The news of Jesus' resurrection in Mark's telling is met not with understanding, but fear. His own followers and friends flee from the tomb "for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."[115]

For all of Frei's aspersions against modern readers whose interpretive frameworks fail to attend to the literary form of the gospel narratives, or whose frameworks play too strong a role in their reading so as to obscure the narrative details of these accounts, Frei's reading of the unity of the Bible's narrative witness fails to grapple with one of the more obvious literary features of these texts—the juxtaposition of four *disparate* accounts of the same life, the same series of events.[116] As Lynn Poland argues, this is particularly strange given Frei's commitment to the "inseparability of subject matter from the depiction or cumulative rendering."[117] Do each of these divergent gospels by virtue of their own distinct narrative structure offer an independent meaning? Do they each offer their reader a different identity of Jesus?[118] Poland goes on to say that Frei's commitment to the signifying unity of the gospel story—to the narrative structures that enable stable and normative interpretation—also fails to acknowledge the substantive diversity in the interpretation of these texts

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[113] There are arguably four endings to the book of Mark—but several codices (including B and Aleph, produced in the Fourth century) conclude the book at Mark 16:8, while others add either the shorter ending (what is now printed in some Bibles as an unversified two-sentence amendment to 16:8), or the longer ending (printed as 16:9-20). See Paul L. Danove, *The End of Mark's Story: A Methodological Study* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993); Robert Oliver Kevin, "The Lost Ending of the Gospel According to Mark: A Criticism and a Reconstruction," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45 (1926): 81-103.

[114] Luke 24:32, 45.

[115] Mark 16:8 NRSV. We might see Frei's refusal to acknowledge this as a possible end to the gospel story in terms of a short aside he gives in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* when speaking about the relationship of the resurrection to the rest of the gospel narrative. Frei writes, "The unity and continuity of the narrative's structure is such—especially in Luke's account—that to leave out the climax furnished by the story of the resurrection (and even that of the ascension) would mean doing irreparable violence to the literary unity and integrity of the whole account. It would violate the story at its integrating climax" (Frei, *Identity,* 125-6).

[116] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 11.

[117] Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* 14. Frei adds an exception to this rule about the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, explaining: "there are, of course, other kinds of stories that merely illustrate something we already know; and there are other stories yet that function in such a way as to express or conjure up an insight or an affective state that is beyond any and all depiction so that stories, though inadequate, are best fitted for the purpose because are evocations, if not invocations, of a common archetypal consciousness or a common faith. In both of these latter cases the particular rendering is not indispensable, though it may be helpful to the point being made" (Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 13)

[118] Lynn Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics,* 135-136.

and of the person of Jesus. "By ruling out of hand the possibility of misinterpretation, such a position has no means to deal with the varieties of distortion of the Gospel narratives which do, in fact, occur."[119]

While few of Frei's readers or reviewers disputed the deep insights of his theological engagement with biblical narrative, many shared Poland's concern with Frei's inattention to the differences between the four gospels. Biblical scholar Richard Hays, for example, noted the striking absence in Frei's extensive treatment of the resurrection narratives to any of the substantive differences between them. Hays writes, "without reflecting explicitly on the problem of their diversity, [Frei] seems to treat them as complementary witnesses to a single unified story."[120] While Frei's work demonstrates the capacity of narrative hermeneutics to "assist in the retrieval of the unity of the scriptural witness"—Hays points out that Frei does very little to help his reader make sense of the narrative diversity or particularity of the gospels, leaving what Hays identifies as a conspicuous gap in the theological interpretation of biblical narrative.[121]

David Tracy seconds Hays' criticism.[122] While Tracy praises Frei's extension of Barth's theological hermeneutics and the recovery of "premodern realistic history-like narrative form as the preferential rendering of God's self-meaning,"[123] he adds, "where the new Barthian narrativists seem far less persuasive is in their seeming belief that Luke's particular form of a realistic, history-like narrative suffices for the Christian naming of God." "Surely this will not do," Tracy writes. What of the "disruption and nonclosure" of Mark, or the "unyielding undertow of tragedy" in Matthew?

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[119] Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics,* 136.

[120] Richard B. Hays, "Can Narrative Criticism Recover the Theological Unity of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008): 193-211, 198. In an early review of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Cornel West makes a similar comment, writing that while Frei provides "the best historical study we have" on the history of hermeneutics in the modern period, at the end of this long history and Frei's extended account of normative interpretation "we still are left with little theoretical machinery to face the problem of indeterminacy." West goes on to suggest that Frei's nostalgia for pre-critical interpretation appears as a vain wish that biblical texts were a little less "fraught with background" (Cornel West, "On Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,"* in *Notre Dame English Journal A Journal of Religion in Literature*, XIV [1982]: 151-154, 153).

[121] A gap that Hays attempts to remedy in the remainder of this article as he sketches some lines of substantive agreement between the gospel writers about "the soteriological purpose and effect" of Jesus death" without denying the real difference in their theological vocabularies (Hays, "Can Narrative Criticism Recover the Theological Unity of Scripture," 205).

[122] The debate between Hans Frei and David Tracy has been a driving interest in attempts to define the terms of "narrative theology" or to distinguish between the "Chicago" and "Yale" schools. See Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1987): 687-717; M.A. Higton, "Hans Frei and David Tracy on the Ordinary and the Extraordinary in Christianity," *The Journal of Religion* 79 (1999): 566-591; Marsaura Shukla, "Reading and Revelation in Hans Frei and David Tracy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66 (2013): 448-465.

[123] David Tracy, "Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God" *The Journal of Religion* 7 (1994): 302-319, 310.

What of the peculiar "meditative and symbolic tale" of John that is "not like a nineteenth-century realistic narrative at all"?[124] Elsewhere, Tracy asks whether Luke's "relatively sanguine" and "sometimes all-too-continuous salvation-history" narrative might "lend itself too easily to an undesirable degree of abstraction from the painful negativities, interruptions and sufferings of history as viewed in the light of the cross."[125]

Theologian Maurice Wiles offered a similar critique of Frei's theological engagement with biblical narrative in his review of Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. Wiles wrote that while Frei's aim is to offer an account of Jesus Christ normed by the storytelling strategies of the evangelists, "he seems in practice to be offering us a rather generalized New Testament theology, whereas if he had been true to his own method he would have taken far more account of the differing forms of narration within the New Testament."[126] In a later text, Wiles clarifies this critique of Frei's proposal further, writing: "To treat scripture in this way [as a unified narrative] is not something that can easily be done without going back on the genuine insights that critical study has engendered."[127] There is an irreducible diversity to the gospel narratives, Wiles claims, one that ought not to be ignored by any theologian purporting to reflect on the substance and style of biblical narrative. He continues, "What we have to acknowledge is that, even if the concept of reading the Bible as one story is allowed, it is not at all clear what that one story is."[128]

In Frei's own copy of Wiles' review, there is a small note scribbled in the margin next to Wiles' criticism of Frei's "artificial" construction of a composite gospel from the four independent narratives. Frei writes,

> This is absolutely right. I must have been blind. At least I should have *argued* the case. Luke was my central text and I thought Mark and Matthew had a sufficiently similar underlying pattern in those respects I was analyzing to allow me the notion of one story in all three

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[124] David Tracy, "Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God" 310-311. Tracy admits elsewhere that "Frei clearly is neither Tatian or Marcion," arguing that his harmonizing account of the scriptures might simply be seen as the best reading of their plain sense as received by the Christian community for centuries. He then adds, "nevertheless, the entire canon already bespeaks so remarkable a diversity of readings of the common confession and narrative that the diversity should also be theologically affirmed as long as the plain sense of the common passion narrative is not disowned. For there is a danger in remaining solely with the plain sense of the common narrative," citing in particular the inability of readers trained under this model to see theological diversity and pluralism within the text itself (David Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," in *Theology of Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* ed. Bruce D. Marshall [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990], 35-68, 43).
[125] Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," 47-48.
[126] Maurice Wiles, Review of *The Identity of Jesus Christ* in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1976): 261-262, 262.
[127] Maurice Wiles, "Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction: The Limitations of Narrative Interpretation" in *Scriptural Authority in Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), 42-58, 46.
[128] Wiles, "Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction," 48.

> synoptic gospels. Again, my 'method' should have dictated that I at least argue that these three stories constitute one story, without reducing their differences.[129]

While Frei does not exactly concede the whole of Wiles' criticisms, he does admit to himself that he ought to have justified the interpretive liberty he took in treating the four gospels as a composite whole, granting that his exegetical work may indeed have minimized the substantive differences between these four narratives. Beneath this private admission in the margin of Wiles' review, Frei adds the words: "*Mea maxima culpa.*"[130]

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to three of Frei's students—Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher, and Kathryn Tanner—who take up the mantle of their mentor in a variety of ways while still marking out the limits of his interpretive proposal. Each of these theologians extends Frei's theological reflection on biblical narrative by pointing to the unfinished tasks of narrative theology and the need to grapple with the fault lines and fissures of the biblical canon.

III. Stanley Hauerwas

Stanley Hauerwas only took one class with Hans Frei during his time as a student at Yale Divinity School.[131] Still, Hauerwas is credited in many circles (perhaps more than he'd prefer) as among the more significant heirs to Frei's legacy and the school of narrative theology. Though Hauerwas was an early and prolific advocate of the turn toward narrative, arguing in the seventies and eighties for the inclusion of narrative approaches to the study of Christian ethics,[132] he now stands among the critics of the broad application of "narrative" by Christian theologians.[133]

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[129] Hans Frei, "Notes on Maurice Wiles' Review of *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, *Journal of Theological Studies,* 27 (1976): 261-262," quoted by Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History,* 201.

[130] Ibid. In a letter written to Bruce Piersault only five years after the publication of his two major works, Frei also recanted some of his earlier confidence in the normative interpretation of the Bible, writing: "*Eclipse* was not influenced by the deconstructionists; I was far too unwashed literarily to know what they or even their predecessors were up to at that point. On the contrary, I was really naively persuaded that there was such a thing as normative meaning to a narrative text, if not to others. Since then I've become a bit more jaded under their influence" (Frei to Bruce Piersault, July 8, 1980, quoted by Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses,* 25-26).

[131] Hauerwas writes in his autobiography: "I never took a class with George Lindbeck, who was in Rome at Vatican II. I had only one course, Christology, from Hans Frei. Thus it would not be quite right to say that these remarkable men were my teachers. Nonetheless, I had a wonderful education at Yale, and I have spent a lifetime trying to think it through" (Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010], 49).

[132] See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, "The Self as Story: Religion and Morality from the Agent's Perspective," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 1 (1973): 73-85; "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 15-39. "The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and Ethics of Remembering," *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 356-370; "The

In many respects, Hauerwas' engagement with narrative interpretation over the last four decades echoes and extends the work of his predecessor. Like Frei, Hauerwas is interested in in the distinctive capacities of realistic or history-like narratives—particularly those found in nineteenth-century novels and biblical literature.[134] Hauerwas develops ideas that are nascent in Frei about the capacity of novelistic discourse to bring into relief certain features of human identity by figuring them within a temporally narrated sequence, allowing a reader to witness virtues like "constancy" or "forgiveness" that can only be observed over the slow "unfolding of a character's life."[135] Hauerwas also shares Frei's investment in the way that biblical narratives render the identity of Christ so as to offer that identity to the Christian community. Though Hauerwas' approach to the narrative identity of Christ takes a more communal approach to narrative identity than Frei's earlier and better known texts, there is a strong affinity between Hauerwas' account of the story of Jesus as a distinctive social ethic and the attention in Frei's later work to the communal dimension of scripture's literal sense.[136]

At times, Hauerwas' reflections on biblical narrative repeat some of the interpretive missteps identified by Frei's critics. He too has a habit of speaking about the gospel or "the Christian story" in singular terms,[137] going so far as to claim certain ethical postures as the single, self-evident implication of these narratives, taken as a whole. Hauerwas writes, "I believe the narrative into which Christians are inscribed means we cannot be anything other than non-violent…non-violence is simply one of the essential practices that is intrinsic to the story of being a Christian."[138] In

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Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (1980): 55-83.

[133] Hauerwas admits this when he writes "I am partly to blame. I was there, so to speak, at the beginning" (Hauerwas, "The Narrative Turn: Thirty Years Later," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* [Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015], 135-151*,* 136).

[134] Though each of them cite a wide variety of literary sources in their work on narrative, Hauerwas and Frei seem share an affinity for the nineteenth century novel, drawing on the work of Anthony Trollope and George Eliot, among others.

[135] Stanley Hauerwas, "Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue," in *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 31.

[136] See Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation,* 59-78; George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," 48.

[137] Richard Hays writes, "Hauerwas' interpretations of biblical texts rarely depend upon detailed exegesis or sustained close reading. His references to 'the story of Jesus' function as broad allusions to the Gospel narratives seen as a whole" (Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996], 259).

[138] Hauerwas, "Whose Just War? Which Peace," in *Dispatches from the Front*, 137. Hauerwas qualified this point, claiming that the relationship between biblical narrative and pacifism was matter of simple and certain scriptural citation. He writes, "One cannot show that Christians are committed to non-violence on the basis of this or that text of Scripture. That limitation does not mean that texts are unimportant or that some texts may not be particularly significant for learning how to live nonviolently. But no account of Christian nonviolence can be justified by any particular biblical text of group of texts. The text of the Bible in and of itself does not require pacifism. Rather, only a church that is nonviolent is capable of rightly reading, for example, Romans 13….Christian nonviolence or pacifism does not name a position;

another essay, he puts this claim in even stronger terms, arguing: "non-violence is not just one implication among others that can be drawn from our Christian beliefs; it is at the very heart of our understanding of God."[139] The practice of non-violence is not only the proper meaning of the gospel narratives, but also the necessary prerequisite for "rightly reading" these narratives, because the story of the gospel is only intelligible within a community of readers who have formed their lives so as to be "capable of hearing...and living in a manner that is faithful to that story."[140] Hauerwas writes, "Put as contentiously as I can, you cannot rightly read the Sermon on the Mount unless you are a pacifist."[141] This unqualified understanding of the singular meaning of the gospel story is perhaps what led one of Hauerwas' readers to quip, "It seems that one either understands biblical narrative as Hauerwas does or one does not understand or appreciate the role of biblical narrative at all."[142]

But alongside this unified reading of the Bible's ethical wtiness, there is also evidence to suggest that Hauerwas sees the limitations to construing both biblical narrative and the Christian gospel in singular terms, and understands the need for Christian theology to account for the plurality of voices and perspectives canonized alongside one another in biblical narrative, and to allow this plurality to shape and inform theological discourse. Take for example an essay entitled "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom." Here, Hauerwas begins in familiar terms, parsing "the narrative dimension of Christology" or "the story of Jesus," in the singular, and emphasizing the need for this singular narrative to form and chasten a distinctive Christian social ethic, far from the stories "built on shared resentments and fears" that characterize worldly communities, leading them to practices of violence and power-mongering.[143] "Jesus is the story that forms the church," Hauerwas writes, a story that takes as its principle aim distinguishing this community from other communities, or, in his own familiar shorthand, "helping the world to know what it means to be the world."[144] However, in its final paragraphs, the essay moves away from Hauerwasian tropes and the seemingly singular vision of the gospel story. Hauerwas writes:

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rather, it denotes a set of convictions and corresponding practices of a particular kind of people" (Stanley Hauerwas, "Can a Pacifist Think about War?" in *Dispatches from the Front,* 118).

[139] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), xvii.

[140] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 1.

[141] Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 64.

[142] Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 116.

[143] Hauerwas, "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom," in *A Community of Character,* 49-50.

[144] Hauerwas, "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom," 50.

> The social ethical task of the church…is to be the kind of community, that tells and tells rightly the story of Jesus. But it can never forget that Jesus' story is a many-sided tale. We do not just have one story of Jesus, but four. To learn to tell and live the story truthfully does not mean that we must be able to reconstruct 'what really happened' from the four. Rather it means that we, like the early Christians, must learn that understanding Jesus' life is inseparable from learning how to live our own. And that there are various ways to do this is clear by the diversity of the gospels.[145]

Here, Hauerwas sets his own strong claims about the meaning of "the story of Jesus" against the reminder—provided by the four juxtaposed gospel witnesses—that this story is "a many-sided tale" and that there might therefore be "various ways" to live and read this story faithfully.

We see this move again in another essay on "The Moral Authority of Scripture." In several respects, this piece follows the Hauerwasian grain, claiming that the "authority of scripture is a political claim characteristic of a very particular kind of polity" and that this authority is intelligible only in the lives of those communities who comprise this polity.[146] But while a reader might expect Hauerwas to offer us an outline of the specific political commitments that characterize this new polity (non-violence prominently among them), the remainder of the essay is dedicated to the difficulties of forming a coherent "biblical ethic" and the need to develop communities that mirror the Bible's own narrative strategies by refusing to suppress the disputation and conflict that comes as a consequence of preserving and reinterpreting a living tradition. "Scripture is not meant to be a problem solver." Hauerwas writes, "It rather describes the process whereby the community we call the church is initiated by certain texts into what [James] Barr has called the 'vivid and lively pattern of argument and controversy' characteristic of biblical traditions."[147] On these terms, an essential component of the formation of Christian communities is the tension between juxtaposed narratives and traditions. Hauerwas writes,

> One reason the church has had to be content with the notion of a canon rather than some more intellectually satisfying summary of the content of scripture is that only through the means of a canon can the church adequately manifest the kind of tension with which it must

[145] Hauerwas, "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom," 52.
[146] Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 53.
[147] Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 63.

> live. The canon marks off as scripture those texts that are necessary for the life of the church without trying to resolve their obvious diversity and/or even disagreements.[148]

Here, the tensions or frictions that are preserved within the biblical canon between conflicting narrative traditions are read as an essential component of the Biblical text, and of its capacity to form its readers' relationships to friction and diversity within their own ecclesial communities. "Scripture does not try to suppress those subplots or characters that may challenge, or at least qualify the main story line," Hauerwas writes, "for without them the story would be less than truthful."[149]

"The canon is not an accomplishment but a task," Hauerwas writes.[150] The unity of the tradition is not self-evident, not something that can be taken as a starting point, but instead is an ongoing task for communities of readers who continue to bring disparate and diverse narratives into relation. When this task is set aside in favor of submitting a cleaner, "composite" version of the canon (as we see in Frei's treatment of the gospels), it distorts the frictive character of the text and forfeits whatever education these frictions may have supplied for addressing similar tensions and disagreements within the communities of readers who have called this text sacred.

Hauerwas writes elsewhere that the story of scripture offers the church "a hope disciplined by patience" that is necessary for the life of that community.[151] The meaning of this claim about patience is often parsed by both Hauerwas and Hauerwasians in relationship to the tension between our present political life and our hope of the world to come. But we might also read it along the lines of Hauerwas' less quoted and less-developed insights about the frictions and fissures in the biblical canon. The Bible's depiction of the hope that is to come—of full knowledge and full understanding of the one "in whom all things hold together"[152]—is disciplined by the present state of its form. The textual tensions that Hauerwas identifies in his writings on the Bible as an integral part of the canon's "truthful" witness correspond with his meditations elsewhere on the finitude of human nature and human perception in time. We might therefore read these frictions as a form of instruction in the patience that disciplines hope, as we wait to know fully what the text reminds us (in both its contents and its form) that we now know *only in part*.[153] To

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[148] Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 66. Hauerwas later clarifies what he means by the "necessary" quality of these texts, explaining that biblical narratives "render the character of God" and therefore the Bible "renders us to be the kind of people appropriate to that character" (Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 67).
[149] Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 67.
[150] Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," 68.
[151] Hauerwas, "Introduction" to *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, 5.
[152] Colossians 1:17 NRSV
[153] 1 Corinthians 13:12. This recalls a comment Hauerwas makes elsewhere when he writes "Israel develops the means to be a faithful storyteller just to the extent that she resists the temptation to resolve the tension between the divine

submit the part as the whole, to choose the coherence of a single gospel over the fourfold chord, is in some respect to refuse this discipline, forfeiting whatever virtues might lie in resisting an easy resolve and learning to remain with difficulties and with the diversity of the tradition as it has been received.

IV. William Placher

William Placher studied under Hans Frei at Yale Divinity School in the early 1970s, just before Frei published his two major monographs. When Frei died in 1988, Placher worked with George Hunsinger to edit and publish the manuscript of his third monograph, *The Types of Christian Theology*, and five years later, a collection of his lectures and occasional essays entitled *Theology and Narrative*. Placher is remembered alongside Hauerwas as one of the younger members of the "Yale" or "narrative" school of theology, again, not without protests to the contrary.[154]

While Frei remained a major influence on Placher over the course of his education and during the years he spent honoring and extending his teacher's legacy, Placher's biblical hermeneutics depart from Frei's in one signal respect. While Frei emphasizes the narrative coherence of scripture, and in particular the narrative coherence of the gospels in their depiction of the identity of Jesus, Placher worries that this picture fails to do justice to the "plurality and ambiguity" that characterizes both the narratives themselves and the relationships between adjacent narrative materials throughout the biblical canon.[155]

A year after finishing the editorial work on a collection of Frei's essays, *Theology and Narrative*, Placher published an article in *Modern Theology* that examined the limitations of mainstream theological approaches to biblical narrative (including that of his mentor). Taking up the same textual parallels that stood at the heart of Frei's narrative project—the conclusions of the four canonical gospels—Placher makes a case for a new theological reading of biblical narrative, drawing out the divergences and incongruities between the narrative accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

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promise and its failure to be fulfilled" (Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation,* ed. Garrett Green [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], 182.

[154] See Derek Nelson, "The Vulnerable and Transcendent God: The Postliberal Theology of William Placher," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44 (2005): 273-284; William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), xviii; William Placher, "Being Postliberal: A Response to James Gustafson," *The Christian Century,* April 1999, 390.

[155] William Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 144-163.

This essay bears the marks of the enduring impression that Frei made on his student, as well as Placher's express desire to "remain faithful to the spirit of Frei's project."[156] We see this desire, for example, in Placher's statement that "the ends of the gospels turn out to have something to say, precisely by the way their narrative forms function about the relation of the narrated world of the Gospel and the world of their readers."[157] At the same time, Placher also turns away from the "composite" model of Frei's narrative analysis of the gospels, claiming: "these texts prove most helpful in thinking about such matters if one respects their diversity and their ambiguities." Placher continues, "If one tries to conflate them into a single story, or to ignore the internal tensions within each of them, one loses sight of the varied narrative strategies that lead to theological lessons."[158] To let any single gospel narrative overpower the others and become the singular story of Jesus (as Frei does with the gospel of Luke) is to lose the substance of the man that these oddly juxtaposed texts seek to narrate: "the vulnerable one who turned away from the misuse of power."[159]

This loss, Placher claims, is too often suffered by standard theological approaches to biblical narrative. "Even as the Christian tradition has preserved biblical diversity…Christian theologians have often ignored its implications."[160] Turning to Frei's *Identity* as one salient example, Placher points out that Frei took his narrative analysis of the life of Jesus almost exclusively from the picture provided by Luke, "focusing not only on one Gospel but on the one with the smoothest narrative coherence."[161] Frei's reading practices here are not the exception to the rule, Placher claims, but rather representative of the general practice of narrative theologies, a practice that obscures the literary diversity of the biblical canon under the powerful coherence of the singular, unified gospel story.

Placher clarifies the insufficiencies of his teacher's hermeneutic paradigm for a literary and theological engagement with scripture by examining the "ends" of the four canonical gospels. He contrasts the conflicting narratives we find at the end of these texts about the nature of Jesus'

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156 Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 145. Placher writes, "If twenty-five years ago the first task in such an enterprise was to emphasize their character as realistic narratives, it may now be important to discuss what complicated narratives they are."
157 Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 144.
158 Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 144-145.
159 Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God,* 104.
160 Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 146. Placher continues: "In periods where the literary tradition emphasized narrative coherence, a similar emphasis naturally developed in biblical interpretation. Societies with clear hierarchies of power naturally looked for, and therefore found, in scripture a coherent, univocal authority."
161 Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 146.

resurrection: the frightened women who flee the tomb in Mark from the peculiar seashore appearances of Jesus in John or the walk-and-talk between an unidentified Jesus and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem in Luke. He adds to these narrative difficulties the myriad debates over their textual authenticity (whether considering the final materials in Mark or John that seem odd appendages to these literary bodies, or the peculiar Trinitarian language at the end of Matthew that appears to some as a pious editorial redaction). There is perhaps no better example than the ends of these four gospels of what makes the narratives of the life of Jesus so difficult to harmonize, so impossible to view as a literary or theological composite. "No one needs to deconstruct these texts," Placher writes, "they fall apart in your hands."[162]

Frei's proposal to read the gospels as "true" insofar as they offer an authentic depiction of the identity of Jesus (whether or not the events they describe actually transpired) provides one way around the critical quagmire about the historical authenticity of these texts. However, Placher argues that Frei ultimately fails to address a key feature of their narrative strategy. By functionally ignoring the variance between these juxtaposed accounts of the life and death of Jesus, Frei ignores a key component of the canonical "logic" of these texts. Placher writes,

> The theological tradition that calls Christians to trust and obey Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture points to a dialectic between the narrated world and the world of the reader that the Gospels' ends themselves capture with varied narrative strategies. We can recognize those narrative strategies, however, only if we respect the narrative logic of the individual gospels. Conflation of the Gospels, in the manner of Tatian's *Diatesseron,* would muddle the ways in which each narrative develops such matters in a quite different way.[163]

If the narrative shape of the gospels is, as Frei argued, to direct and inform their interpretation, then readers must go beyond the bounds of Frei's project to grapple with the persistent fissures and narrative discrepancies that characterize the gospels' "narrative logic" (not to mention that of the diverse canonical histories, or the conflicting testimony we find within the narratives of the Pentateuch).[164]

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[162] Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 148.
[163] Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 160.
[164] Placher writes, "Having four different stories of Jesus' ministry is at least inconvenient, and their inconsistencies lead beyond inconvenience to embarrassment and potential scandal. Moreover, this is a fixable problem; it is actually not that difficult to piece together a single narrative with only quite minimal excisions. Yet with rare exceptions Christians have not done it" Placher, "Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 145.

In the eulogy that Placher wrote for Frei after his death and later published as a tribute to his life and work in *The Christian Century*, Placher spoke again about Frei's deep theological intuitions about biblical narrative, as well as Frei's own recognition that this work remained incomplete. Placher writes,

> No one was more conscious than Frei that he had left many questions unanswered. The Bible is not just one big story, but a complicated collection of narrative and nonnarrative material. Even with straightforward narratives, in the Bible or anywhere else, a variety of critics from feminists to deconstructionists have reminded us that the meaning of a text can lie as much in what it does not say as in what it says. Frei knew that and, with a modesty as frustrating as it was admirable, was likely to admit that he did not himself know how to solve the problems even as he remained convinced that he had glimpsed an insight that was somehow true.[165]

In the end, while Placher affirmed his mentor's insights about the importance of scripture's narrative form, and the need to reflect on this form theologically, he took a slightly different view of what is on offer in biblical texts.

For Placher, conflating the gospels into a single composite or the texts of the Bible into a "one big story" muddles the plurality and ambiguity that the Bible preserves in the diversity of its narrative witness, and in this way departs from the independent narrative logic and perspective of each of these texts. The tendency of narrative theologians to take as their object of study some singular "gospel story" as an imagined lowest common denominator between variant traditions excludes significant portions of Biblical narrative, and denies the potential revelatory significance of the *differences* between these traditions. While Placher remains vague about the nature of the "theological lessons" he claims that the Bible preserves in the tension between variant narrative strategies—perhaps to leave such lessons open and undetermined—he clearly argues that in choosing a composite of the text over attention to its differences, narrative theologians have in large part sprung free of whatever instruction these textual tensions would have otherwise provided.

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[165] William Placher, "Hans Frei and the Meaning of Biblical Narrative," *The Christian Century* 106 (1989): 556-559, 559.

IV. Kathryn Tanner

Kathryn Tanner studied at Yale in the early 1980s, under the guidance of Hans Frei,[166] George Lindbeck and Louis Dupré.[167] Though Tanner is one of the more prominent students of the post-liberal tradition,[168] she is not known for her work in biblical hermeneutics. That said, Tanner published a few essays on biblical narrative in the early stages of her career that take up many of Frei's central hermeneutic claims. Tanner clarifies some of Frei's more obscure insights (i.e. his late rendering of the plain sense of scripture as a function of its "communal use"[169]) and points to certain missteps in conventional "literary" approaches to the Bible, including those of her late mentor.

In an article published in *Modern Theology* in 1998, Tanner considers the theological turn toward biblical narrative, and the way in which theologians like Frei drew on theories of literary value to account for the Bible's "timeless" meaning.[170] While these theologians made comparisons between the Bible and high literary classics in order to establish a rationale that could account for the text's capacity to speak "across differences of time and place," Tanner argues that the Bible is better compared to what she calls a "popular text." While high-literary classics tend to yield unitary meanings and clear narrative continuity,[171] Tanner argues that the Bible's gaps and indeterminacies invite the reader into a significantly more active role in the construction of the text's meaning.[172] She writes,

> The parallel processing of information and associational logic necessary to understand the puns that so often grace trashy tabloid headlines are something like what reading the multiple versions of biblical tales requires. The incoherent appearance of the New Testament canon that contains conflicting theological perspectives on Jesus' person is something like the tension-filled self-

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166 Tanner dedicated her second book to her mother and to Hans Frei, who she identified as "two good Christians, who would no doubt be uncomfortable so described" (Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 1).
167 Kathryn Tanner, "Christian Claims: How My Mind Has Changed," *The Christian Century,* February 2010, 40-46.
168 See Gary Dorrien, "Truth Claims: The Future of Postliberal Theology," *The Christian Century,* July 2001, 22-29; Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013), 90-93.
169 Kathryn E. Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59-78, 62.
170 Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 279-298. Though Tanner departs from her mentor's hermeneutic model, she insists: "I follow Frei here in my willingness in principle to modify any general theory of literary value in order to do justice to the oddities of a particular text" (Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 294).
171 This point is arguable (and indeed I will demonstrate in the subsequent chapter that literary classics do not always yield this form of unitary meaning).
172 Tanner distinguishes this form of invitation from the avant-garde novels which "force their readers into an active process of meaning production." Instead, she writes that the Bible does not appear to be difficult, but instead seems "to be talking about everyday reality in a down-to-earth way" (Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text,"292).

> presentation of a Madonna who somehow manages to incorporate at once both a sexist view of women like her and a skepticism about the same tendencies of men to objectify the female form.[173]

On this account of the Bible's literary form, "the plurality of possible readings always stands ready to contest the adequacy of any one."[174] Unlike Frei's work on biblical narrative, Tanner does not offer an account of how a reader might properly arrive at the "meaning" of a given text, nor does she name an interpretive antagonist who fails to respect the terms of the text as they are given. In fact, Tanner argues that beneath the antagonisms levied by theologians against improper or "disrespectful reading" there lies "the counterfactual image of a biblical text that works to enforce a unitary meaning." She argues that "one can only properly respect the biblical text by respecting it for what it is—a text that is not anything like that image."[175]

Tanner furthers her distance from Frei's reading of the carefully unified pattern of the life of Jesus as she writes that biblical narratives "are not texts that convey the realistic character of their narration by an appearance of inevitability in the way that what comes next." Instead, Tanner argues that a character's words and deeds and the interplays of these acts with circumstance are often unpredictable and surprising, revealing "the distinctive ambiguity of typological connections between events."[176] Citing examples of these interpretive connections in intra-biblical exegesis, Tanner continues, explaining:

> Typological connections are as likely to include surprising reversals as simple continuities. Thus, in a very odd retelling of (among others) stories that concern how the second-born becomes the first…God's people are said to refuse the one, Jesus, to engraft those without rights into the covenant. No one could have expected this; and, despite the repetition of this biblical pattern, it is not at all obvious how the story remains the same one—the same tale of a God faithful to the people of Israel.[177]

Tanner calls attention to some of the recurring difficulties of biblical interpretation—the ambiguities and obscurities that make clear and well-founded judgments about the meaning of these connections difficult. While Frei reads the gospel narratives as a unified, linear depiction of the slow emergence of the identity of Jesus (as the one who is obedient to the Father), Tanner reminds us that there are moments in the gospels that make this straight and narrow plot progression difficult to reconcile

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[173] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 291-292.
[174] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 294.
[175] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 294.
[176] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 290.
[177] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 290.

with the substance of the texts themselves. There may well be a linguistic or literary connection in biblical narrative between the waters of the Red Sea and that of baptism, but there is no final pronouncement about how we ought to read the relationship of these elements to one another.[178]

To determine in advance the kind of story the gospels are telling prevents us from raising the kind of questions in our engagement with these texts that renew the hermeneutic task, and see the puzzling difficulties of this body of texts as an invitation toward a mode of thought that sees conflicting readings as the promise of the tradition's endurance rather than a threat to its stability.

"Those messy biblical books are a problem—so many versions concerning even the most crucial details of Jesus' life and death!" Tanner writes, only partly in jest. "Some consistent telling of the story would have to replace the established biblical canon if greater theological uniformity were to be achieved."[179] Hermeneutic projects like Frei's make us wonder if this humorous counterfactual is in some circles *fait accompli*—if the Bible has become transfigured into a clear, linear storyline, forfeiting an essential component of its composite character in order to serve certain theological ends.

In her book *Theories of Culture,* Tanner argues that to read the Bible apart from its persistent internal tensions and to idealize consensus over disagreement (as postliberals often do),[180] reflects an underlying anxiety about diversity and creativity in theological judgment. This anxiety prevents readers concerned with the *unity* of Christian belief to grapple with the Bible as the complex production of a long and contested tradition. She writes,

> Established productions have internal fissures or fault lines that make them vulnerable to revision. Because they emerge in the messy, conflictual course of history, the materials included in such productions are bound to be inconsistent and in tension with one another, and capable of being held together, therefore, only through the exertion of pressure. One cannot simply get rid of such tensions and inconsistencies by making of these materials anything one likes. Instead, one must always struggle with the meanings and associations that history has already secured for them to some extent…but the existence of internal strains

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[178] There is something in Tanner's regard for the dual particularity and relation of varying elements of biblical narrative that parallels her later writings on difference and relation in the Trinity. See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 83-84.

[179] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 170-171.

[180] Tanner writes, "In their effort to maintain Christian identity, postliberals are in danger of confusing subordination to the word with subordination to a human word... It is when the Word is given up into the hands of its interpreters that the effort to be true to it becomes the excuse for a power play between competing human words, the rationale for a demand to subordinate one theological position to another. The theologian assumes obedience to the Word can only be ensured by obedience to a particular theological position" (Tanner, 149-150)

> always holds the potential for change; it established a hook on which to anchor elements under strain and reconstitute them in some other form."[181]

The hooks of the text's internal strains—what we have been calling hermeneutic frictions—cultivate a different identity for the Christian community, built on the ground of a shared struggle for the text rather than a common assent to a unified narrative whole: "What unites Christian practices is not, then, agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship; but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."[182]

"Perhaps one job of the theologian is to keep the biblical imagination open," Tanner writes, "by offering not a new reading for a new time but a science of the possible, a sketch of what it is about this text that invites the unending production of multiple, quite disparate interpretations."[183] In the following chapter, I take up this task, considering the ways in which the Bible's hermeneutic frictions stand as one feature of the text that cultivates an interpretive openness in the space between juxtaposed and divergent narrative traditions—an openness that invites ongoing and creative rereadings.

VI. Conclusion

William Placher writes, "One problem for theology that takes biblical narratives seriously is that it cannot easily be done in small pieces. Its persuasive force will lie most often in the cumulative picture it can tease out of biblical stories in all their variety."[184] Over the last four decades, while literary readings of the Bible have moved away from the grand sweep of Moulton toward smaller studies of literary units within the larger text,[185] theological engagement with biblical narrative has remained bent toward the cumulative picture, toward the themes and formal patterns between disparate books that lend meaningful coherence to this large body of texts. As George Lindbeck

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[181] Tanner, *Theories of Culture,* 165.
[182] Tanner, *Theories of Culture,* 153. Tanner writes, "One should not try to contain diversity by getting rid of it because diversity involves certain positive goods. Human judgment is fallible and therefore the chance for correction by others who disagree with one is a valuable thing. True discipleship is more likely to come out of a wrangling with others about its nature than it is to spring simply from one's own head and heart fully realized…The recognition of God's free and uncontrollable Word, which respect for Christian diversity spreads, desocializes Christians, so to speak; it breaks the habit of the normal, and thereby frees them for renewed attention to the word" (Tanner, 175).
[183] Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," 295-296.
[184] Placher, Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives," 144.
[185] Modern literary guides to the Bible tend toward the format of the essay collection, where single authored or edited volumes are divided into focused essays on distinct literary units or literary "strategies" that might compare two such units to one another. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987).

himself writes, for the theologian "narrative interpretation…presses the exegete toward finding the same basic understanding of the church in all the New Testament literature," adding that though the differences between the various books of that second testament are real, "it is of the very nature of narratives to subsume variations that outside their narrational context are contradictions."[186]

But while narratives allow us to see coherent patterns and themes between disparate elements of text, time, and experience, that is not the only thing narratives do. In fact, as Tanner argues, narratives often reveal to us the deep ambiguity of these connections, and the difficulties of knowing with any certainty that we have read the relationships between various moments and experiences in the right way. We so often see, and do not perceive.

In a recent lecture given at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Rowan Williams offers an alternative framework for understanding the relationship of narrative to the structures of human thought along the lines of Tanner's proposal—focusing on the capacity of narrative discourse to illuminate the difficulties and obscurities in human perception. Williams writes,

> Difficulty is part of human thinking. Something resists, but that resistance is not the end of the story, the resistance is at the same time something…something that draws us, invites and provokes. Something is there that is not absorbed or exhausted, and so thinking engages inevitably with difficulty. Thinking with things, in the middle of things, is bound to be a difficult business. Narrative is a difficult business. The significance of narrative in any account of what human thinking and therefore human society is about is that it does not let us get away from that difficulty.[187]

Here, Williams recasts narratives not simply as a means of clarifying or organizing thought, but of demonstrating the difficulty of the process of understanding in way that corresponds with our experience of perceiving and interpreting the world. Narratives, and in particular the kind that Frei is so fond of—realistic novels like *Middlemarch*—rarely "mean what they say."[188] That is, they do not give their readers self-evident interpretive maps, but instead offer opposing perspectives, opposing readings of a given speech or event or object of our attention without any clear key for how this opposition might be resolved.

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[186] George Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation, " in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative* Interpretation, 168-169.
[187] Rowan Williams, "On Narrative and Ritual," London School of Economics and Political Science 14 May 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXpB3e5MsFM Accessed June 24, 2016.
[188] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 12.

Contrary to romantic notions of literature advanced by thinkers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that "the common end of all narrative…is to construct a series into a whole," there are many forms of literature that not only contain irresolvable internal conflicts, but advance such conflicts as the central means by which they produce, explore, and interrogate meaning.[189] Such texts demand a different account of what literature is and does, and of the interpretive tasks that texts like these set before their readers. One of the central conceits of this project is that the Bible is one such text, and so demands a theory of reading in which the tensions between its multiple gospels and disparate histories plays as large a role in its literary and theological interpretation as any efforts to see these conflicting stories cohere together in some harmonious whole.

Narratives like Eliot's *Middlemarch* remind us of the difficulty of toggling between the inexhaustible particularities of experience, the infinite angles of possible interpretation, and our earnest desire for all of these things to somehow cohere together. The significant challenge posed by this difficulty in interpretation comes in attending to the dual pull of elements that resist absorption and the demand for coherent understanding: that we forge some means by which we might take in the whole. These challenges are perhaps further complicated in our engagement with biblical narratives due to the additional force of those theological commitments that guide our reading and interpretation. David Kelsey explains that for the theologian "to call a text or set of texts 'scripture' is to ascribe some kind of wholeness to it." This wholeness, Kelsey explains, is what we mean by the theological concept of the canon.[190]

This chapter has demonstrated, however, that there has been a significant imbalance to theological conversations about biblical literature. The turn toward biblical narrative has too often come down on the side of the text's wholeness and coherence, functionally ignoring substantive conflicts between biblical narrators or compositional tensions within singular narratives, and risking making the Bible an instrument toward a predetermined interpretive end.[191] "The achievement of

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[189] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Letter to Joseph Cottle, 1815 quoted by M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 141. Coleridge imagined the true aim of literature as forming itself into a straight linear, unified pattern: the perfected οὐροβόρος—"the snake with the tail in its mouth."

[190] David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 89.

[191] Derek Attridge provides a helpful definition of literary instrumentalism as "the treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce that usefulness." Attridge writes that while this instrumental attitude toward literature may be a necessary means of making efficient use of most of the verbal texts we encounter, preventing "the continual re-evaluation of our beliefs and

coherence is itself ambiguous," Iris Murdoch reminds us, "coherence is not necessarily good, and one must question its cost. Better sometimes to remain confused."[192]

In the next chapter, I turn to an alternative model of the relationship between narrative meaning and hermeneutic frictions. The novels of George Eliot and Hermann Melville feature parallel tensions between the testimony of various narrators or between divergent representations of a singular object or event. Far from accidental defect, such frictions emerge in these novels as the central means of rendering what Eliot calls the "incalcubly diffusive" quality of so many objects of human attention. A close look at the role that these frictions play in the production of literary meaning in these novels invites us to consider, in the final chapter, how the presence of similar frictions in the vehicle of divine self-revelation might serve not as exceptions to otherwise functional hermeneutic rules, but rather as constitutive elements of the Bible's narrative witness and thus promising sites for constructive theological reflection.

I am not unmindful of the precarious nature of suggesting that the strategies of interpretation suitable to literary reading might prove instructive in our interpretation and engagement with the former, given their distinct genres, time periods, conditions of composition—to say nothing of the variant stakes implied by the scriptural status of biblical narratives within both Judaism and Christianity.[193] Such complications make it difficult to move between the interpretation of literature and the interpretation of the Bible—to read the Bible, as Eliot's friend Benjamin Jowett once suggested, "like any other book."[194]

That said, those who read the Bible "as literature" have already made a determination in favor of the relative merits of plundering the Egyptians—the decision is not whether to adopt strategies from our engagement with other literary texts in our literary engagements with the Bible, but which ones are adopted, which excluded. Or, in stronger terms, once we have read the Bible according to the norms and conventions provided by its literary readers, what remains unread and unseen? If the task of reading the Bible as literature has been understood as a means of "catching the unity of all Scripture," as Moulton claimed, or once we take the gospels "as a composite

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assumptions," it risks denying literature its "otherness"—its capacity to challenge, innovate and surprise. (Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* [London: Routledge Press, 2004], 7).

[192] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 147.

[193] Peter Hawkins writes, "People would live, die, and even kill for these texts as no one, not even the most diehard Dantista or Shakespearian would for a canto or a play" (Peter S. Hawkins, "Negotiating Boundaries: Teaching the Bible as Literature," *Religion & Literature* 47 [2016]: 236-241, 237).

[194] Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture" in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 377.

narrative," as Frei proposed, what substantive inner-canonical tensions have thereby faded from view? If we have taken the purpose of biblical narrative as providing us with a coherent story—one that in turn enables us to read and render ourselves coherently—how might the incongruities and frictions of this text risk losing their capacity to speak to those parts of our lives which appear similarly conflicted, similarly difficult to reconcile into some coherent form? Once we have read the Bible as literature on these terms, once we have determined in advance that the aim of interpretation is always to make things cohere, what stands as the neglected and ungleaned remainder—both of these texts and of our experiences of being in the world?

Chapter Five | *Hermeneutic Friction and Literary Meaning*

it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view…[1]

GEORGE ELIOT

any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty…[2]

HERMAN MELVILLE

[1] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 66.
[2] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 147.

I. Introduction

In the three preceding chapters, I outlined a brief history of reading, centered around the interpretive challenges posed by the Bible's own internal hermeneutic frictions. Chapter 2 considered how these frictions came to be understood by higher critics as an impetus toward the determination of more and less reliable biblical narrators, and therefore more and less reliable biblical texts. Chapter 3 turned to the rise of literary approaches to the Bible at the end of the nineteenth century, demonstrating how these texts utilized a largely defensive approach to literary reading in order to reclaim the Bible's higher unities and reframe its authority on aesthetic rather than historical grounds. Chapter 4 considered how these same literary modes of interpretation were appropriated toward constructive theological claims by theologians like Hans Frei who continued to prioritize the unity of biblical texts over and against any consideration of their disparate witness. This chapter ended by turning to the voices of Frei's students, who affirm the virtues of theological attention to biblical narrative, even as they mark out the limits of their mentor's approach, calling for a form of theological speech that might adequately address the fissured qualities of biblical literature.

While the interpretive postures taken up by literary readers of the Bible and the "narrative" theologians who followed their lead are often sketched in diametric opposition to the methods and aims of higher critical scholarship, they actually share a markedly similar approach to the internal tensions we find within the biblical canon. More often than not, these otherwise disparate approaches to biblical interpretation exhibit a common commitment to the *unity* of the Bible as a literary text—either as a descriptive fact (in the case of early literary readers of the Bible or narrative theologians) or as a regulative ideal (in the case of higher critics). The tensions between the conflicting perspectives of biblical narrators thus appear in all three as an interpretive *problem* that ought to be in some way resolved. Whether by forcing divergent accounts into a unified whole, or discounting the veracity of certain narratives in order to regain a confidence about the reliability of others, these seemingly "alternative" approaches to Biblical literature share a common aim: to *overcome* the interpretive difficulties posed by this text's internal hermeneutic frictions in order to reclaim the Bible (or parts of the Bible) as a literary text—that is, on their terms, as a unity.

In this chapter, I move away from what Adam Zachary Newton calls a "deontological" mode of literary reading, driven by a sense of what a literary text *ought* to do and so motivated "to evaluate or even solve a text's problems" in accordance with a previously established ideal. Instead, I want to advance what Newton calls a "phenomenological" approach to the text, moving away from

judgments about what texts ought to do to an inquiry into what it is that texts are actually doing. This approach returns to those hermeneutic frictions once categorized as "problems" or obstacles for the Bible's literary reader and engages them instead "in their concrete, formal, narrative particularity" as a productive site for both literary and theological reflection.[3]

To revisit the literary significance of those textual elements of the Bible long exiled as matters of historical inquiry may require a brief education in how to reflect on these frictions and fissures in literary terms. To that end, this chapter turns to literary texts in which the tension between conflicting perspectives plays a central role in their discursive activity in order to find new tools for the literary interpretation of the Bible, fit to the tasks posed by these persistent hermeneutic frictions. While I agree with scholars like Robert Alter who argue that "the best way to get a handle on the Bible's literary vehicle is to avoid imposing on it a grid external to it but instead to patiently attend to its minute workings and through such attention inferentially build a picture of its distinctive conventions and techniques," I think that after a long education in a form of literary reading guided by a idealized vision of the text's unity and coherence, we may need to be reminded of the ways in which conflicts between narrative voices and variant perspectives can be meaningful rather than threatening for literary and even theological interpretation.[4]

Over the last half century, literary critics have advanced several theories that address the multivocality of literary texts, including Mikhail Bakhtin, with his study of the diverse social speech types that come into dialogue in the modern novel; Geoffrey Hartman, who looks at the relationship between midrashic strategies of reading and postformalist literary criticism; and Julia Kristeva, whose notion of "intertextuality" encouraged readers to see the words of literary works in dialogue with one another in the space between texts.[5] For the purposes of this project, however, I turn back to two novels that preceded this critical work, modeling forms of hermeneutic activity and attention that critics and philosophers had not yet theorized. These nineteenth-century novels stand at the seedbed of the history this dissertation has thus far illuminated, presenting a different approach to the literary significance of disparate or competing narration—one that was available to higher critics,

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[3] Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics,* 11.
[4] Robert Alter, "Preface to the Revised Edition," *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, xi.
[5] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981); Geoffrey Hartman, Introduction to *Midrash and Literature,* ed. Geoffrey Harman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

literary readers, and narrative theologians, but never gained ground in literary interpretations of the Bible.

At a time when scholars of all sorts were becoming anxious about the distortive potential of the subjective interpreter, submitting new rigors for scholarly inquiry founded on what Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison call the nineteenth century's "moralization of objectivity," two novelists—George Eliot[6] and Herman Melville—offered their readers a different way of thinking about the role of perspective in the work of understanding.[7] Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872)[8] and Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851)[9] reframe anxieties about the subjective aspect of interpretation so that the friction between the perspectives of juxtaposed and divergent narrative voices is presented not as a problem that the reader or text must somehow resolve, but as a means of illuminating the nature of human knowing and human perception. The resulting picture is not an anxious commentary on the fragile nature of interpretation, but a call toward more multivalent ways of understanding what Eliot terms the "incalcubly diffusive" quality of so many of the objects that claim and hold our attention.[10]

Much could be said (and indeed has been said) about the relationship of Eliot and Melville to the Bible, to Christianity and even to the controversial rise of higher criticism in Germany and its reception among English and American readers.[11] My primary object in this chapter, however, is not to rehearse these discussions, but to focus on moments in their fictional work when hermeneutic frictions similar to those we find in the Bible emerge not as threats to the integrity of their larger

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[6] George Eliot, born Mary Ann Evans, went by many names over her lifetime (including Marian Evans, Mary Ann Evans, Marian Evans Lewes, and Mary Ann Cross). Since I am speaking mostly of her literary work, I will refer to her as "George Eliot," making exceptions where she has published under other names.

[7] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations* 40 (1992): 81-128; 81. "The history of the various forms of objectivity might be told as how, why, and when various forms of subjectivity came to be seen as *dangerously* subjective." See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

[8] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994); subsequent page references refer to this edition. *Middlemarch* was originally published as eight smaller books that came out in serial form at steady intervals between December of 1871 and December of 1872. (Bert G. Hornbach, "Preface," to *Middlemarch: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Bert G. Hornback [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977).

[9] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: Penguin Classics Deluxe Editions, 2001); subsequent page references refer to this edition.

[10] *Middlemarch,* 838.

[11] As a primer to these novelists relationship to both the bible and scholarly biblical interpretation see Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1949); Robert Kenneth Kirby, "Melville's Attitude Toward the Historicity and Interpretation of the Bible" PhD diss., Indiana University, 1983, Proquest (8401605); Norman Vance, "George Eliot's Secular Scriptures," in *Bible and Novel: Narrative Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Lisa Baltazar, "The Critique of Anglican Biblical Scholarship in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Literature and Theology* 15 (2001): 40-60; J. Russell Perkin, " 'Feeling's A Sort O' Knowledge': George Eliot's Religion of Humanity," *Theology and the Victorian Novel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

texts, but as sources for literary meaning, and as occasions to reflect on the ordinary, refracted processes of human understanding. In Eliot's *Middlemarch,* these frictions emerge in her depiction of the follies of certain romantic approaches to comparative scholarship that cannot see past the persuasive, unifying powers of their initial theories, as well as in conflicts of competing understanding between human persons that foreground "the difficult task of knowing another soul."[12] In Melville's *Moby Dick*, we see these frictions at play in a slightly different way in the novel's endless attempts to comprehend objects of study or attention—particularly when that object exceeds our interpretive frameworks (such as the indecipherable inscriptions on the prize doubloon, the mysterious story of Jonah, or the novel's eponymous white whale).

I am not oblivious to the fact that I have taken on a few white whales myself in choosing to write about two of the longest and most beloved novels in the English language, and to engage these two texts together in the space of a single chapter. Nor am I naïve to the interpretive issues implicit in comparing the fragmentary or frictive qualities of the diverse canon of biblical literature to that of a single-authored text—suggesting, if only implicitly, that such frictions in biblical literature should be read as they are in Melville or Eliot as some part of the author's (or redactor's) intention.[13]

It is important here to note that I am speaking about reading rather than writing. To consider the Bible's hermeneutic frictions from the side of writing would be to frame this inquiry in terms of intention (whether that intention is associated with the creative design of some individual author or later redactor, or to the sovereign intention of a divine creator). While it may be fruitful to consider the possible intentions behind the preservation of such frictions—to ask, for example, why there are four gospels rather than one—in this moment I am speaking in a more limited sense, directing my inquiry toward questions that emerge in our encounters with these texts as we try to make sense of internal fissures we find within and between these stories. What do we learn as readers from the frictive form of these texts about the substance of their subject matter? How might

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[12] *Middlemarch,* 119.

[13] Joel S. Baden writes, "There is a difference between the literary interpretation of a compositionally unified text and one that is not a unity—a difference that lies not in how the interpretation proceeds but in what the interpretation achieves…while a literary reading of a historically unproblematic text may contribute to an already comprehensible text a sense of artistic or aesthetic pleasure, or reveal previously unnoted nuances, or illuminate otherwise hidden meanings, the literary reading of a composite text serves to move it from the basic category of incomprehensible (understood broadly) to comprehensible (understood loosely)…The issue is both whether it is sensible to look for coherent meaning in the final form of the text and whether we can attribute whatever meaning we might find to a creative figure, identifiable or merely theoretical, whom we might hold responsible for that final form" (Joel S. Baden, "Redactor or Rabbenu? Revisiting an Old Question of Identity," in *Sibyls, Scriptures and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy,* ed. Joel S. Baden, Hindy Najman, Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar [Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016], 97).

their form speak to the nature of the interpretive task, and specifically to those interpretive tasks that appear to exceed our categories for understanding?

To this end, I turn to two novels in which hermeneutic frictions play a large, even central role. Though these novels do not appear natural candidates for comparison, written two decades and an ocean apart, separated by genre, subject matter and style, they share a number of things in common. There is a resemblance, for example between their monomaniacal villains—Mr Casaubon and Captain Ahab—whose desire to see the world through one all-encompassing idea results in the tragic end of both their lives and work. Or there is their common preoccupation with science: with anatomy, biology and physiognomy; or with history, mythology, and comparative religion.[14] Further still, there is the fact that each of these novels appears to change course over time, shifting from the genre conventions of an adventure story or a Victorian marriage plot to something entirely different. What I wish to describe in this chapter, however, is less the textual parallels between these novels, interesting as those may be, and more the parallel interpretive activities they provoke in their readers.

This chapter will examine the way that hermeneutic frictions function within these texts—on the understanding, in Martha Nussbaum's words, that "style itself makes claims."[15] It will also consider the way these texts provide theories of reading and interpretation in their inclusion of conflicting narrative perspectives as well as in the self-conscious reflection of these novels' narrators on the hermeneutic process. While each of these texts reflect on the negative edge of individual perspective in the production of knowledge—the distortions of ego, for example, or the limitations of any individual point of view—this recognition does not yield a nihilistic posture toward knowledge, nor to an insistence of the objectivity or authority of one voice against others. Instead, these novels explore the ways that the recognition of perspectival limits might open the human knower to different ways of seeing in the world. By continually juxtaposing divergent accounts of the objects these novels set before their readers (a difficult marriage, the measurements of a whale, the symbolic meaning of foreign currency), and providing commentary that urges readers to look again and open their initial assumptions to revision, these novels apprentice readers in habits of lingering attention to frictions and incongruities in both texts and experience.

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[14] See for example: Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Richard Dean Smith, *Melville's Science: "Devilish Tantalization of the Gods!"* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1993); Phillip Hoare, "How Science Inspired Moby-Dick," *Nature* 493 (2013): 160-163; Brett Zimmerman, *Herman Melville: Stargazer* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998).

[15] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

"The gospels accustom our eyes to multiple but convergent vision," Rowan Williams writes, reflecting on the four juxtaposed narratives accounts of the life and death of Jesus we find in the New Testament.[16] "How?" we might ask, "and to what end?" Here we turn our attention to two novels that similarly apprentice readers toward habits of "multiple but convergent vision" in order to see how frictions might become generative sources for literary meaning. *Middlemarch* provides us with a meditation on the side of human knowing, an invitation to witness the diversity of our variant perspectives and a call to empathetically occupy the position of multiple knowers in order to yield deeper and truer understandings of our world and of one another. *Moby-Dick,* on the other hand, extends that meditation with reference to the objects of our knowledge, helping us see the particular use of hermeneutic frictions in our attempts to apprehend that which exceeds both our sense faculties and our understanding.

II. Middlemarch

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is, as its subtitle suggests, "A Study of Provincial Life." It is a study of a set of characters that live alongside one another in and around a small Midlands town, and an account of how these characters study their world and one another.[17] *Middlemarch* is a novel about perception, about the way that we form impressions and the way that these impressions solidify into knowledge. The lengthy plot is advanced less by dramatic events themselves than by the drama of its characters' everyday acts of interpretation (and by the frequency and gravity of their persistent misinterpretations).[18] By foregrounding the difficulty and folly of human knowing and the distortive tendency of the knower to see "in the way most gratifying to himself"—whether that object be a romantic interest, a scholarly hypothesis, or the market value of a dappled grey horse[19]—the novel offers its readers a comedy of errors that is not without its own deep tragedies.

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[16] Williams, "The Fourfold Chord," 344.

[17] *Middlemarch,* 141.

[18] Karen Chase puts it similarly in her discussion of the primacy of reason and explanation in *Middlemarch,* claiming that while "characters seem to inherit their desires…they formulate their reasons, and the dramatic action of the novel lies in this sustained activity of *mind*, the conscious determination of aims and motives." Chase persuasively argues that the prominence of interpretation (both of one's own desires and reasons and that of others) makes Eliot's realism "not simply a portrait," but an "activity" (Karen Chase, *Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens and George Eliot* [New York: Routledge Press, 1984], 141, 145)

[19] *Middlemarch,* 30. Alexander Welsh writes, "Most of the principal characters in *Middlemarch* have as their aim, in one form or another, the pursuit of knowledge," explaining that while these quests for knowledge are introduced one after another over the course of the novel, the plot eventually "calls every one of the quests in doubt" (Alexander Welsh, "Knowledge in *Middlemarch,*" *Modern Critical Interpretations of George Eliot's* Middlemarch [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987], 113, 116).

This drama of understanding and misunderstanding is nowhere clearer than in the novel's depiction of Edward Casaubon, who comes to be a prime exemplar of dubious interpretation. Casaubon exemplifies a mode of reading that, much like the models of literary engagement with the Bible mentioned above, cannot brook incongruities or friction. Instead, he must forcefully resolve all of his variegated textual data and all of the particulars of his human relationships into unified and stable theories of the whole. My engagement with *Middlemarch* and its depiction of the ordinary difficulties that characterize the everyday work of interpretation will focus on its treatment of Mr Casaubon, and the way that his interpretive vices are set against the emergence of his spouse's interpretive virtues, in the realms of both scholarship and human sympathy.

In the first part, I consider the way the novel slowly illuminates the limits and distortions of Casaubon's scholarly pursuits, examining the ways that the novel slowly calls Casaubon's scholarly labor into question. To further illuminate this discussion, I juxtapose the novel's depiction of the tragic limits of Casaubon's scholarship with essays Eliot published decades before she began her work on *Middlemarch* critiquing the insular and unscientific character of conservative biblical scholarship in order to draw out the similarities between these reading strategies and that which Eliot fictionalizes in the endless and sadly fruitless studies of Middlemarch's Casaubon.

I will then turn from the insular qualities of Casaubon's scholarly work to the similar approach he takes to interpretation in the sphere of human relationships (what I later refer to as "social knowledge"). In particular, I will focus on the relational misunderstandings that plague Casaubon's relationship to Dorothea, and the way the narrator situates two parallel accounts of this tragic marriage in order to draw attention to the limits of both partner's perspectives and the need to toggle between how the world appears to Casaubon and how the world appears to Dorothea in order to see truly and feel justly—as indeed Dorothea slowly learns to do.

Though this material represents only a small subsection of *Middlemarch* (Casaubon meets his unfortunate end only midway through the novel), these analogous comparative exercises will provide a helpful window into the ways in which this text dramatizes hermeneutic activity, and in particular the way it paints the failures of what literary critic David Carroll calls a "totalizing search for unity and meaning"—one that is fatefully bound to come up against its limits.[20] Whether we are looking

[20] Gillian Beer makes a similar comment when she writes, "The typical concern of the intellectual characters in [Eliot's] books is with visions of unity, but a unity which seeks to resolve the extraordinary diversities of the world back into a single answer: the key to all mythologies, the primitive tissue, allegorical painting" (Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots:*

over Casaubon's endless labors to offer the scholarly world a "key" to all the world's mythologies, or watching Casaubon or Dorothea slowly reckon with the loss of ultimate fulfillment they first thought their partner would provide, Carroll explains that *Middlemarch* presents us with "the life of the novel as a hypothesis, continually collapsing under the weight of new evidence which the different segments of the narrative bring to light."[21] The word "collapsing," however, seems to suggest that the novel falls in on itself, that all of its ventures toward meaning are helplessly fated to fail. While *Middlemarch* certainly depicts the follies of its characters' hermeneutic missteps, these missteps are not designed to encourage a form of resignation with regard to the capacities of human knowledge. Instead, I will consider the ways in which this novel frames the conflicts and limitations of human perspective as a charge—with both moral and epistemological weight—to look again, past the determining force of one's initial hypotheses or first impressions. While Casaubon hardens himself against this recognition, Dorothea finds herself "no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest reception"—receiving the tension between her perspective and that of her husband's as an invitation to a different mode of knowledge.[22]

The Key to All Mythologies

In the second chapter of *Middlemarch,* we meet the scholarly Casaubon, whose "spare form" and "pale complexion" liken him favorably in the eyes of young Dorothea to a portrait she once saw of John Locke.[23] Dorothea is immediately charmed by this elderly[24] man, who she quickly identifies as "the most interesting man she had ever seen." Beyond his initial Lockean charms, Dorothea is further captivated by what she learns from Casaubon about the substance of his academic work. In the novel's first chapters, she hears that Casaubon has long been slaving away on an extensive reconstruction of the past, "doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth." "What a work

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Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction, 3rd Edition [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 162).

[21] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

[22] *Middlemarch,* 365.

[23] *Middlemarch,* 16.

[24] A.D. Nuttall helpfully reminds readers that Casaubon is not truly as old as he seems in the novel. He is actually "between forty-six and forty-nine"—though he indeed appears to be much older. Nuttall writes that this is not a mistake on Eliot's part, but rather illustrative of the toll that time and reading has taken on him; Casaubon "is losing the battle of life. Old age has seized him prematurely" (A.D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down: Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 26-27).

to be in any way present at," Dorothea muses, early in their meeting, "to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder!"[25]

Casaubon's all-consuming life work—the one he will later try to leave his wife on his deathbed and so "keep his cold grasp on Dorothea's life"—is the substance of what he hopes will one day be a scholarly monograph entitled "The Key to all Mythologies."[26] This monograph promises to feature an extensive survey of ancient mythological literature that will serve as a defense of the primacy of the Genesis narratives over and against their ancient near eastern parallels, proving that "all mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed."[27] The large aims of this scholarly project draw Dorothea into a marriage she hopes will be a fulfillment of her own vocation as well as a "spiritual communion" with Casaubon—whom she calls, in the early stages of the novel, "a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed!"[28] As the plot progresses, however, the shadow of Dorothea's subtle qualifier—"almost"—slowly darkens her initial impressions of Casaubon's genius, and calls into question the validity of his lofty hypotheses.

This disillusionment comes, in large part, as a consequence of Dorothea's conversations about her husband's work with his cousin, Will Ladislaw (who will, much later in the novel, become Dorothea's second husband). In response to Dorothea's increasing anxieties about the protracted pace of her Casaubon's scholarly labors, Ladislaw disputes Dorothea's estimation of her husband's contribution to his field, remarking that Casaubon's project is only "crawling a little way after men of the last century."[29] Elsewhere, Ladislaw adds, "it is a pity that it should be thrown away, as so much English scholarship is, for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble." But Casaubon has, in Ladislaw's judgment, "deafened himself in that direction," refusing to read German scholarship on the Bible or ancient mythology and so producing a scholarly work that is irrelevant before its debut, condemned by the terms of its own insular vision.[30] While Dorothea is initially defensive of the value of her husband's work, she gradually comes to see the truth in Ladislaw's criticism.

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[25] *Middlemarch,* 18.
[26] *Middlemarch*, 493.
[27] *Middlemarch*, 24.
[28] *Middlemarch*, 22.
[29] *Middlemarch*, 222.
[30] *Middlemarch*, 208. Ladislaw says "the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in the woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads."

Lisa Baltazar persuasively argues that Eliot's depiction of Casaubon's scholarship (and of Dorothea's final negative assessment of its worth) should be read in relationship to Eliot's engagement with conservative English biblical scholarship outside of her fictional work.[31] While readers of Eliot's novels are usually familiar with the author's early rejection of organized religion and with her identification of biblical narratives as "histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction," they are slower to identify a relationship between the more complex position Eliot develops in her writings on biblical scholarship (particularly those published in the *Westminster Review*[32]) and the way she depicts biblical scholars as well as the wider work of interpretation in her novels.[33]

In an 1851 review Eliot published of R.W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect,* for example, Baltazar identifies an exegetical clue to a connection that Ladislaw makes between the futility of Casaubon's project and that of a scholar he refers to in passing as "Bryant."[34] Baltazar explains that "Bryant" is likely Jacob Bryant,[35] a scholar who published a multi-volume monograph from 1774 to 1776 entitled *A New System or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, endeavoring much like Casaubon to use comparative study of world mythologies in order to establish the primacy and historicity of the Bible's version of these mythic narratives.[36] In the aforementioned review essay, Eliot extols the virtues of Mackay's biblical research over and against the insularities of the English scholarship,

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[31] Baltazar writes, "From the time in which George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is set (it opens in 1829) to the time in which it was written (1870-1872) an intense debate about the origin and nature of the Bible was taking place in England" (Lisa Baltazar, "In a Pier-Glass: The Transformation of the Bible in *Middlemarch,*" PhD diss., University of Virginia [1999]: 5). See also Lisa Baltazar, "The Critique of Anglican Biblical Scholarship in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," 40-60. Baltazar's article remains one of the clearest pictures of Eliot's engagement with Anglican biblical scholarship and her caricature of their narrow modes of inquiry in the figure of Casaubon. While Baltazar sees Eliot's investment in this conversation as a consequence of her interests in the enduring ethical import of the Bible (over and against the distortions found in the work of contemporary biblical scholarship), I argue that these investments also betray an interest in a form of narrative strategy (the friction between competing narrators) that she found also in Homeric literature (through F.A. Wolf) and that would later appear as a recurrent dynamic in her fiction—particularly in *Middlemarch*.

[32] For more on Eliot's publishing history in *Westminster Review*, see Beryl Gray, "George Eliot and the 'Westminster Review'" *Victorian Periodicals Review* 33 (2000): 212-224.

[33] George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol.1, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 128-129

[34] *Middlemarch*, 222.

[35] Eliot's *Middlemarch* notebooks contain sketches and quotes from Bryant's work that indeed resemble what she will come to compose as Casaubon's project. Eliot summarizes Bryant's text at one point, writing: "Mosaic account entirely confirmed. Deluge the ultimate fact for all nations. Noah, under whatever title, the first king in every country" (Eliot, *George Eliot's Middlemarch Notebooks: A Transcription*, 48).

[36] Jacob Bryant, *A New System or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology: Wherein an Attempt is Made to Divest Tradition of the Fable and to Reduce Truth to its Original Purity* (London: T. Payne, 1774-1776). Scholars have also drawn a connection between Mr Casaubon and several other scholars, including Eliot's friend Mark Pattison, who married a woman twenty-seven years younger than he was, or the biblical scholar Isaac Casaubon—a French classical scholar of the sixteenth century, famous for his early work on the Homeric question and See A.D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Malcolm Bull, "Edward Casaubon and Isaac Casaubon," *Notes and Queries* 45 (1998): 218-219; Michelle Faubert, "A Possible Source for George Eliot's Casaubon," *ANQ* 18 (2005): 46-52.

embodied for Eliot in the person of Jacob Bryant.[37] While "England has been slow to use or to emulate the immense labours of Germany in the departments of mythology and biblical criticism," for Eliot, Mackay stands out among English scholars as a virtuous exception[38]:

> The introduction of a truly philosophic spirit into the study of mythology—an introduction for which we are chiefly indebted to the Germans—is a great step in advance of the superficial Lucian-like tone of ridicule adopted by many authors of the eighteenth century, or the orthodox prepossessions of writers such as Bryant, who saw in the Greek legends simply misrepresentations of the authentic history given in the book of Genesis.[39]

By way of contrast with scholars like Bryant, whose bibliographies lack any references to German scholarship,[40] Eliot praises Mackay's research, which elevates itself above the conventional, insulated posture she observes among her English contemporaries. By Eliot's lights, English biblical scholarship has already decided what it will think about the Bible and its position in the canon of world literature, and so "has no susceptibility to the pleasure of changing its point of view, of mastering a remote form of thought, of perceiving identity under a variety of manifestations."[41] Bryant serves as a stand-in here, and arguably in *Middlemarch* as well, for what Eliot identifies as an unscientific approach to the Bible: a refusal to see beyond the set terms of predetermined and dogmatic hypotheses.[42]

In another piece written in the *Westminster Review* a few years later, Eliot published an anonymous critique of Scottish preacher John Cumming, drawing attention to what she identifies as the elective blindnesses of this popular minister's faith-based rationality.[43] Eliot writes that "the doctrine of verbal inspiration" of the biblical text that Cumming advances is "a formula imprisoning

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[37] R.W. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Greeks and Hebrews, 2 vols.* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1850); "Review of R.M. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect,*" *Westminster Review* 54 (1851): 353-368.
[38] "Review of R.M. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect*," 354.
[39] "Review of R.M. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect*," 359-360.
[40] John Clark Pratt and Victor A. Neufeldt, "Introduction," to *George Eliot's* Middlemarch *Notebooks* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), xlvii.
[41] Ibid., 354. We find a similar reflection in *Middlemarch* as Dorothea's uncle and father-figure, Mr. Brooke, contemplates the positive and negative aspects of Dorothea's impending marriage to Casaubon, claiming "it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view" (*Middlemarch*, 66).
[42] In his *Progress of the Intellect,* Mackay makes a claim that appears to have been an inspiration for Eliot. Mackay writes: "No writer on mythology is sceptical enough to assert its memorials to be without meaning, nor, on the other hand, so credulous as to claim to possess an infallible key for the solution of its puzzles." It seems likely that Eliot had this caricatured "infallible key" in mind when she titled Casaubon's project—*A Key to all Mythologies.* (R.W. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews,* 215, as quoted by A.D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down,* 60).
[43] "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," *Westminster Review* 64 (1855): 436-452.

the intellect, depriving it of its proper function—the free search for truth—and making it the mere servant-of-all-work to a foregone conclusion."[44] She continues,

> Minds fettered by this doctrine no longer inquire concerning a proposition whether it is attested by sufficient evidence, but whether it accords with Scripture; they do not search for facts, as such, but for facts that will bear out their doctrine. They become accustomed to reject the more direct evidence in favour of the less direct, and where adverse evidence reaches demonstration they must resort to devices and expedients in order to explain away contradiction.[45]

Here again, Eliot criticizes the biblical scholarship of her English contemporaries on the grounds that it refuses to sit with its internal tensions or to subject its theories of biblical literature to testing or critique. Scholars like Cumming look only for evidence that will support their preordained conclusions, Eliot claimed, forcing them to ignore any apparent contradictions that might demand new forms of thought or new modes of interpretation.

In *Middlemarch*'s depiction of Casaubon's scholarship, we find a strong correspondence to the tendencies Eliot identifies in the work of both Bryant and Cummings to explain away aberrant evidence or contradictions in order to defend the infallibility and primacy of scriptural texts on narrow, unscientific grounds. Early in the novel we learn that Mr Casaubon is a scholar of comparative mythology who reads his variegated data toward a predetermined chronological and evaluative scheme (an understanding of all non-biblical mythologies as a later distortion of an original revelation).[46] Just as Eliot's writings in the *Westminster Review* chastise scholars who are imprisoned to their own presuppositions and so prevented from facing any textual elements that might challenge their assumptions, so in *Middlemarch* she depicts Casaubon as a man enfeebled by a similar form of scholarly weakness.[47] Like Bryant and Cumming, Casaubon tries to unite all the world's knowledge together under his prior sense of principle—a man whose "digestion was made difficult by the interference of citations, or by the rivalry of dialectical phrases ringing against each

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[44] "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," 442.
[45] "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," 442-443.
[46] The novel largely avoids references to the particulars of Casaubon's data, remaining with his own testimony about the wide aims and scope of his project.
[47] W.J. Harvey points out, in reference to the novel's commentary on Casaubon's failure to take German scholarship into account, that Casaubon's project would have been theoretically undermined in 1825 by a German scholar named Otfried Müeller who wrote a book called the *Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology*—a work which Eliot also references in her review of Mackay's text. Müeller "ruled out the so-called etymological proofs that tried to relate diverse myths to a Hebrew origin and showed conclusively that mythologies developed independently; there was no chance of resolving the Many into the One" (W.J. Harvey, "The Intellectual Background of the Novel," *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel,* ed. Barbara Hardy [London: Athlone Press, 1967], 34).

other in his brain."[48] Thus while the young protagonist Dorothea was initially "altogether captivated by the wide embrace of this conception," she later comes to see Casaubon's grand interpretive scheme as illusory and incomplete—"the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful."[49]

Dorothea's decisive refusal of her husband's dying plea that she complete his monograph comes at the conclusion of a long deliberation about the conflict between her sense of marital duty and her lack of intellectual confidence in Casaubon's endeavor. She thinks to herself:

> Mr Casaubon's theory of the elements which made the seed of all tradition was not likely to bruise itself unawares against discoveries: it floated among flexible conjectures…it was a method of interpretation which was not tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog: it was as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together.[50]

For these reasons, Dorothea determines in the end that she does not believe in her husband's work; she cannot take up for herself the task of setting mythological parallels side by side in order to arrive at her late husband's foregone conclusions about the reliability of the biblical myth over and against analogous others. Casaubon's "Synoptical Tabulation"[51] leaves no undetermined possibilities—no potential for his materials to pull his theories up short, such that his work might "bruise itself unawares against discoveries."[52] And so Dorothea puts an end to her husband's unfinished project, sealing it forever inside of an envelope she slides into a desk drawer. The all-encompassing scholarly vision that once attracted Dorothea and so set the events of the novel in motion is now definitively rejected by the protagonist for its narrow vision, its failure to test early hypotheses against later findings or allow its own broad claims to be chastened by the particularity of its data.

There is a marked similarity between the way novel depicts the limits of Casaubon's interpretive endeavor and the way it explores and evaluates the oft erring attempts of its characters to interpret and understand one another. Scholars of all sorts (but perhaps especially in Eliot's estimation those who study the Bible) are wont to see their data "in the way most gratifying" to their prior understandings—explaining away contradiction and absorbing particulars into grand, unified

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[48] *Middlemarch,* 281
[49] *Middlemarch,* 25, 478.
[50] *Middlemarch,* 478-9.
[51] *Middlemarch,* 493.
[52] *Middlemarch,* 478.

theories of the whole.[53] So too it is in Eliot's fiction with more ordinary acts of interpretation, and in our attempts to navigate the dissimilarities between our own sense of things and that of our neighbors.

In the remainder of my discussion of *Middlemarch*, I turn from the failures of Casaubon's interpretive endeavors in the scholarly realm to look at interpretation in the realm of human relationships and the way that friction between divergent representations of characters, histories, and events comes to play a key role in the way the novel considers the drama of human life, and the "the difficult task of knowing another soul."[54] Tina Young Choi writes that in Eliot, "sympathy and scientific observation function in analogous ways."[55] My aim in the following section is to draw strong connections between Eliot's depiction of the hermeneutic vices that cloud certain modes of scholarly inquiry and certain understandings of our relationships to one another and of the hermeneutic virtues that emerge in contrast when characters come to recognize their own persistent blindnesses and seek new modes of interpretation and new forms of knowing.

Social Knowledge and Human Sympathy

Eliot's concern for the distorting force of the ego in the production of scholarly knowledge—particularly in the realm of comparative study—corresponds with an analogous theme in *Middlemarch* regarding the way that the ego warps social forms of knowledge (and therefore social action).[56] The interpretive challenges *Middlemarch* illuminates in Casaubon's scholarship as he

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[53] During the years that Eliot was composing *Middlemarch,* she was also reading the London Library's copy of F.A. Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer*—the text often thought to have inspired Wellhausen's challenge to orthodox views on the unitary authorship of scripture in his own *Prolegomena to the History of Israel.* Friends who heard her speak about this text—about the then novel claim that Homeric literature was not the product of a single hand but rather made up of a variety of text fragments, variously authored and only later redacted into the texts we now know as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—claimed that Eliot emerged from her reading a "strong Wolfian" (Norman Vance, "Myth and Religion," in *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature, Vol. 4: 1790-1880,* ed. Norman Vance and Jennifer Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 198; John Fiske, *The Letters of John Fiske,* ed. Ethel F. Fiske (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 277-279).

[54] *Middlemarch,* 119.

[55] Tina Young Choi, "Probabilistic Knowledge in the Works of Maxwell and Eliot," in *Fact and Fiction: Literary and Scientific Cultures in Germany and Britain,* ed. Christine Lehleiter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 138. Choi writes, "For Eliot, scientific investigation and understanding, and specifically, their handling of the broader epistemological challenges of knowing something about the invisible world, provided one way of thinking through and describing the limits of knowing, a useful model—and sometimes a useful metaphor—for describing her own experiences in narrative, where omniscience gave way to speculation, certitude to productive doubt" (Choi, 139).

[56] Jeanie Thomas writes, "Through all the ups and downs of George Eliot's reputation with her readers, her identity as a moralist has held firm. Virtually unchallenged is the assumption that her novels press a persistent theme and purpose—the expose the egoism in us all, character and reader alike, and to dissuade us from our 'moral stupidity' through

compares parallel, divergent mythological traditions from across the ancient world are repeated for readers in the narrative structure of the novel as a whole. *Middlemarch* offers a study of a small provincial town in comparative perspective, drawing attention to the differences—whether slight or substantive—between the ways that the various members of this small community make sense of the events, conversations, and relationships that comprise the novel's plot. The challenge this larger comparative study presents (to both its characters and its readers) is to take whatever initial keys or hypotheses first appeared to successfully organize their impressions of one another and test them, to allow these hypotheses to be challenged and revised by the experience of looking at characters again, from a different line of sight.

Midway through *Middlemarch*, the narrator offers a visual parable of the fragmentary and often distorted nature of human knowledge and judgment—one that applies equally to Casaubon's scholarly endeavors and to the work of the novel's characters to interpret their world and one another:

> An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent…[57]

Here, the reflective surface of a trumeau mirror offers a meditation on the force of "self" in all of our ordinary sense-making activities. Just as a certain kind of scholar can only ever view the data before him as a confirmation of his own dearly held hypotheses, so too the ego of any given person "produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement" by which the events, characters and circumstances of their variegated existence are brought into the orbit of their own understanding. But while a candle may distort the appearance of these scratches on the surface of pier-glass, in the

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sympathy with the suffering of others with whom we share our lives" (Jeanie Thomas, *Reading* Middlemarch: *Reclaiming the Middle Distance* [Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987], 7).

[57] *Middlemarch*, 264.

dark, you cannot see these scratches at all without the aid of this candle. The light, in other words, offers both the means of seeing and the determination of its limits. These limits, in turn, only become visible to the observer if she can be shaken out of her own optical illusions and come to see how these scattered scratches appear in the glow of another candle's light.

Middlemarch structures its comparative study of provincial life so as to move its reader between the circumscribed perspectives of its characters at intervals, constructing what Elizabeth Deeds Ermath refers to as a "narrative slide."[58] When the novel begins, it appears to center around Dorothea (the first book's titular "Miss Brooke") and her emerging marriage plot. But immediately after a dinner party celebrating her upcoming nuptials, the novel suddenly shifts to the perspective of various guests that readers meet for the first time at this party, returning to Dorothea on her wedding journey nine chapters later.[59] The novel continues in this pattern, shifting at intervals to hover above the perspectives of different Middlemarch residents and so distributing the weight of its plot among a variety of romances, familial feuds and other personal and political entanglements. While this narrative structure once caused Henry James to criticize Eliot's novel, claiming *Middlemarch* was "a treasure house of details" lost within an "indifferent whole," this oscillation between narrative perspectives constitutes one of the distinct pleasures of Eliot's narrative art as well as the central interpretive challenge of her fiction.[60]

While Eliot's juxtaposition of various narrative perspectives bears a surface resemblance to Casaubon's study of comparative mythology, she diverges from her character's scholarly method in her understanding of the aims of comparative study. Unlike Casaubon—and unlike the "leathery Strauss," whose classic work of higher criticism *Das Leben Jesu* Eliot painstakingly translated into English several decades before she began work on *Middlemarch*—Eliot does not situate the differences between narrative perspectives as a problem that the novel or the novel's reader ought to resolve or eradicate.[61] For Strauss (as for Wellhausen in his own comparative study[62]) a contradiction

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[58] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*," in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century,* ed. Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 112.

[59] There are, of course, historical factors behind this structuring device, at least as it stands at the beginning of the novel. Originally, "Miss Brooke" and "Middlemarch" were two separate projects that Eliot later decided to combine. While this may account for the shift in perspectives between the first and second books of the novel, it is noteworthy that Eliot chose to continue the novel in this manner, sliding from the point of view of one character to the next.

[60] Henry James, "George Eliot's *Middlemarch,*" *Galaxy* (1873): 424-428. James thought that Dorothea's arc, though praiseworthy, was lost within the novel's disparate attentions: "Dorothea Brooke is a genuine creation…Dorothea's career is, however, but an episode, and though doubtless an intention, not distinctly enough in fact, the central one."

[61] "Letter to Miss Sara Hennell, Sept" from *The Writings of George Eliot Volume XXIII: George Eliot's Life as Related by Her Letters and Journals,* ed. J.W. Cross (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908), 124.

[62] See Chapter 2

between two or more biblical narrators who are describing the same character, history or event signals that one (if not both) of their accounts ought to be considered "unhistorical" and therefore false. As Eliot herself translated in the 1846 English edition of Strauss' text,

> When two narratives mutually exclude one another, one only is thereby proved to be unhistorical. If one be true the other must be false…But upon a more particular consideration it will appear that, since one account is false, it is possible that the other may be so likewise.[63]

Contradictions of this sort serve a similar function in Casaubon's scholarly work. Analogous but divergent mythological materials provide Casaubon a clear vantage point from which to see what he deems the "erratic" character of non-biblical myth over and against the superiority of the biblical original.[64]

Middlemarch, by contrast, does not juxtapose the conflicting narrative perspectives of its characters in order to champion its truer perceivers and dismiss lesser, more errant interpreters. The novel places competing perspectives side by side not to invalidate one or the other, but instead to encourage its reader to see *between them,* and find there a more realistic, and thus more appropriately complex picture of human thought and human relationships in which we are always seeing in part, knowing in part.[65]

In *Middlemarch,* the limits of any individual perspective are nowhere more apparent than in the frequent misinterpretations that plague the novel's romantic relationships. There is the tragic breakdown of understanding in the marriage between Rosamond Vincy and Tertius Lydgate, for example, who "each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing."[66] Or there is the freighted gap between the perspectives of Dorothea and the man who will later become her second husband, Will Ladislaw, whose minds, though in the same room, remain "aloof…each left to conjecture what

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[63] David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined,* trans. Marian Evans (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1846), 90. Eliot also began a translation of another great classic of higher critical scholarship—Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*—though this translation project was never completed (Vance, "George Eliot's Secular Scriptures," 94).
[64] *Middlemarch*, 24.
[65] Ermath makes a similar claim when she writes about the narrative strategy of *Middlemarch* as a mode of constant reversal that "engages readers in a process that turns toward, and then away from, every formulation. Furthermore, this 'on the other hand' suggests coexistence, not cancellation. There is this view, belief, thought or feeling; on the other hand, there is also that view, belief, thought or feeling" (Ermath, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*," 114).
[66] *Middlemarch,* 165.

was in the other."[67] Or, near the end of the novel, there is the weight toward of all that cannot be spoken or explained between Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode.[68]

While any one of these relationships would provide substantive fodder for a study of juxtaposed and divergent perspectives in *Middlemarch*,[69] here I will remain with Casaubon and Dorothea, and catalogue the varieties of misunderstandings that obtain between these two characters. Neither Casaubon nor Dorothea is an ideal or unbiased interpreter. In fact, a good portion of their marital strife can be attributed to the collateral disappointments that are the aftershocks of early misreadings. Each partner interprets the other as the long-awaited key to their own personal fulfillment. Dorothea imagines that Casaubon will provide her with a meaningful spiritual vocation, while Casaubon imagines that Dorothea will provide him the secretarial skills and adoring support that will enable him to actualize his scholarly vision; both face the disappointment of finding the other ill fit to their own hopes and aspirations. But in the initial stages of their marriage, these slowly swelling disappointments remain private, submerged, for "he knew little of Dorothea's sensations," and "she was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers"[70]

The story of Miss Brooke and Mr Casaubon and of the dissonance between their respective understandings of and expectations for the other unfolds amidst repeated reminders about the difficulties of interpretation and understanding in ordinary life. In the initial moments of their brief courtship, Casaubon's professions of affection are rigid and formal,[71] while Dorothea's responses are full of "ardent self-sacrificing affection."[72] The letter, for example, in which Casaubon professes his intentions to Dorothea for the first time, reads:

> I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those

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[67] *Middlemarch,* 544.
[68] *Middlemarch,* 750-751. "They could not yet speak to each other of the shame that she was bearing with him, or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, 'How much is only slander and false suspicion?' and he did not say, 'I am innocent.'"
[69] It is perhaps noteworthy that much like attempts to extract one gospel narrative from the four, readers of *Middlemarch* have made similar efforts to remove one of the novel's romances from its setting—republishing the parts of the text that compose the story of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, for example, as a separate book entitled Mary Garth: A Romance from "Middlemarch" (*Mary Garth: A Romance from* Middlemarch*,* ed. Frederick Page, referenced by Rebecca Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch,* 256).
[70] *Middlemarch,* 425, 200.
[71] The narrator compares Casaubon's professions of affection to "a diplomatic envoy" who expects his deliberately chosen words to be "attended with results" (*Middlemarch,* 26).
[72] *Middlemarch,* 50.

> graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated.[73]

Dorothea reads this formal and rather passionless letter of intention, and responds in earnest, beginning her reply: "I am very grateful to you for loving me"—something Casaubon noticeably never mentioned.[74] But "Dorothea's faith supplied all that Mr Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid." By way of explanation, the narrator presses the metaphor of faith further: "What believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity? The text, whether of prophet or poet, expands for whatever we can put into it."[75] In Casaubon, Dorothea sees someone whose knowledge of ancient languages can deliver her from her innocent ignorance and help her to arrive at "the core of all things;" indeed, "his efforts at exact courtesy had no defect for her. She filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting them as she interpreted the works of Providence and accounting for seeming discords by her own deafness to the higher harmonies."[76]

But even as Dorothea's interpretations of her suitor continue to stretch beyond a literal reading, the narrator issues a warning against forming too harsh an impression of either Dorothea's naiveté or Casaubon's insensitivity. The narrator explains, for example:

> Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of such ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and coloured by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge. They are not always too grossly deceived…wrong reasoning sometimes lands poor mortals in right conclusions: starting a long way off the true point, and proceeding by loops and zig-zags, we now and then arrive just where we ought to be. Because Miss Brooke was hasty in her trust, it is not therefore clear that Mr Casaubon was unworthy of it.[77]

Interventions like this will continue throughout the novel, often interrupting scenes that depict one character's ill-fated misinterpretation of another.[78] These interruptions foreground the centrality of

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[73] *Middlemarch*, 43.
[74] *Middlemarch*, 45. The narrator adds, "How could it have occurred to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation" (*Middlemarch,* 44).
[75] *Middlemarch,* 50.
[76] *Middlemarch,* 74-75. The narrator explains, "she was not in the least teaching Mr. Casaubon to ask if he were good enough for her, but merely asking herself anxiously how she could be good enough for Mr. Casaubon" (*Middlemarch,* 50).
[77] *Middlemarch,* 25-26.
[78] These intrusions were and have remained a subject of some debate among Eliot's readers. While some readers thought the narrator's frequent interventions were the substantive moral fiber of Eliot's narrative work, others claimed, in the words of one reviewer, that such "miscellaneous observations" were "not always well suited to the particular bent of her genius; indeed, they often break the spell which that genius has laid upon her readers" (Hutton, Richard Holt, *Essays in*

interpretation and misinterpretation in the novel, highlighting the dramatic significance of an "inference"—particularly those inferences that are ill advised. On another level, these interruptions also serve to remind the novel's readers that they too are making inferences, and that these interpretive judgments can be as cloudy and biased as that of the characters themselves. Misunderstanding, after all, arises as a matter of course, and no one, not even the novel's reader, is immune to the temptation of a hasty misreading.

For Casaubon and Dorothea, these misunderstandings begin to take their toll on the couple's honeymoon journey to Rome. We find Dorothea alone, as she often was on her honeymoon, weeping. While Casaubon's vast genius had first seemed to her as the living substance of her own spiritual vocation, it now appears under a new light as a "dried preparation, a lifeless embalmment of knowledge."[79] The "gigantic broken revelations" of Rome—along with her husband's endless, dispassionate commentary on every passing fresco—appear as a portentous sign of all that she can no longer unite into intelligible principles or "loving reverent resolve." Her marriage "was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream."[80] Casaubon no longer appears to her as the key to higher knowledge, nor does he seem to need her in the way she had originally hoped.

At the end of their time in Rome, Dorothea summons the courage to ask her husband if he might finally make use of her and of his endless hours in the library by allowing her to take down his dictations and write his long promised book. Casaubon responds to this desperate request in anger, blind to his wife's private struggle and seeing her request only in terms of his own hidden anxieties. He reprimands Dorothea and explains that the stages of scholarly work are "not to be measured by the facile conjectures of ignorant onlookers."[81] Dorothea repents, and Casaubon forgives, but his

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Literary Criticism, 240, as quoted by Paul Dawson, "From Digressions to Intrusions: Authorial Commentary in the Novel," *Studies in the Novel* 28 [2016]: 145-167; 158-159).

[79] *Middlemarch*, 196. In Eliot's notebooks, she makes a passing remark about how we ought to judge modern authors that bears a striking resemblance to Dorothea's judgment of Casaubon. Eliot authors that authors must cultivate rather than dull our faculties of judgment, by teaching us to take in new things or consider old things in new ways. Otherwise, she writes, "the human mind would be no better than a dried specimen, representing an unchangeable type. When the assimilation of new matter ceases, decay must begin" (George Eliot, "Judgment on Authors," from *George Eliot's Works, Vol. 9* [Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1887], 239.

[80] *Middlemarch,* 194. The narrator contextualizes this transition in Dorothea's impressions of her husband as a familiar part of the ordinary experience of marriage, particularly marriage under the terms of that time: "The fact is unalterable, that a fellow-mortal with whose nature you are acquainted solely through the brief entrances and exits of a few imaginative weeks called courtship, may, when seen in the continuity of married companionship, be disclosed as something better or worse than what you have preconceived, but will certainly not appear altogether the same…we begin by knowing little and believing much, and we sometimes end by inverting the quantities" (*Middlemarch*, 195).

[81] *Middlemarch,* 201.

coldness toward her continues, fueled by his sense that "the young creature who had worshipped him with perfect trust had quickly turned into the critical wife."[82]

Though the novel begins with sympathetic attention toward its young protagonist, it gradually adjusts its perspective to throw a different light on Casaubon's cold demeanor. As with Dorothea's ill-formed idealistic fantasies about the spiritual vocation that Casaubon's work might provide her, the narrator explains, "Mr Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world…liable to think that others were providentially made for him."[83] And though Dorothea has long been the center of *Middlemarch,* the catalogue of Dorothea's marital disappointments is slowly interrupted and set alongside an inventory of Casaubon's own private sorrows. While Casaubon had once thought "providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed,"[84] he finds married life to compound rather than relieve his scholarly frustrations and anxieties.[85] Instead of a secretary, Casaubon finds his intimate to be a critic, or worse, "a spy watching everything with a malign power of influence."[86]

"Middlemarch is a book of errors," Seth Lehrer writes. "From Casaubon's misguided project, through myriad mistakes of marriage made by its key characters, to the overarching imagery of wandering and loss, the novel chronicles the wrongs and wrong-headedness of intellectual aspiration."[87] While many of the characters in *Middlemarch* find that "wrong reasoning sometimes lands poor mortals in right conclusions," or that error might provide its own instruction in time, correcting a character's course and leading them to deeper and truer understandings (and in turn deeper forms of sympathy), Casaubon is not among them. Either by virtue of his early death, or the force of his own deep-seeded intellectual habits, Lehrer writes that Casaubon "remains in the wood of error," never revising his impressions, never changing his mind.[88]

But while Casaubon dies hardened by the force of his own private impressions, unable to finish his comparative study and unable to see Dorothea's generous movements toward him outside

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[82] *Middlemarch,* 418.
[83] *Middlemarch,* 85.
[84] *Middlemarch*, 278-279.
[85] *Middlemarch,* 279.
[86] *Middlemarch*, 200.
[87] Seth Lehrer, *Error and the Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 129.
[88] Seth Lehrer, *Error and the Academic Self,* 130.

his own suspicions about her connection to Ladislaw or her estimation of his scholarly work,[89] Dorothea finds a way to allow the tension between these two ways of looking at their marriage to interrupt her own perceptions and move her toward empathy—toward seeing and feeling with Casaubon. As she bruises herself against the discovery "that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own," Dorothea is able to observe Casaubon in a different light, and to feel a tenderness toward him "fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams."[90] The narrator elaborates:

> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier for her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, that to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.[91]

Dorothea allows the friction between her own vision of her life and her marriage and that of her husband's to be hermeneutically productive, to lead her outside herself. As Karen Chase puts it, "experience strips her egotism,"[92] enabling Dorothea to move outside her private hopes or disappointments and develop a form of "roving sympathy," first extended toward Casaubon and then later toward figures like Lydgate, whose reputations are similarly marred by misreadings.[93]

While the novel depicts the slow, difficult process of Dorothea's hermeneutic education toward a form of sympathy "that can turn like a beacon and that can illuminate whatever it sees," it is also offering this same education to its reader by the same means.[94] While the early stages of the novel, in their focus on Dorothea, appear to encourage a preferential sympathy that matches Dorothea's relationship to her own private struggles, the narrator slowly begins to jolt readers out of

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[89] In a recent interview, when asked about his favorite literary villain, George Saunders answered: "I think I'd take Edward Casaubon, from 'Middlemarch,' who, if he's 'bad,' is bad I the way real people are bad; i.e., starts out himself and then is perfectly content to stay that way, no matter what happens around him or how miserable he is making everyone" (George Saunders, "George Saunders: By the Book," *The New York Times* 19 Feb 2017: BR8).
[90] *Middlemarch*, 210.
[91] *Middlemarch*, 211.
[92] Karen Chase, *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, *Landmarks of World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9. Chase helpfully clarifies that Dorothea never escapes her own subjectivity—an act that is indeed impossible for human knowers. She writes: "She will grow, not by leaving her subjectivity behind, but by learning to feel *within it* that other subjectivities are equivalent" (Chase, *Middlemarch,* 168)
[93] Chase, *Middlemarch,* 42.
[94] Chase, *Middlemarch,* 42.

any "exclusive optical selection" that might have informed their interpretations of this marriage by making marked interventions in readers' interpretations of Casaubon. The sharpest of these interventions comes in the beginning of the novel's twenty-ninth chapter:

> One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect.[95]

Here, by means of an abrupt dash, the narrator interrupts the reader's focus, pulling her out of the exclusive attention on Dorothea she might have grown accustomed to in the early chapters of the novel and asking her to take a second, more sympathetic look at Casaubon.[96]

By means of a set of interruptions similar to those Dorothea faces as she struggles to navigate the newfound interpretive distance between Casaubon's vision of their marriage and her own, readers are challenged to see beyond whatever initial hypotheses offered them a coherent, unified vision both of this marriage and larger dramatic arc of the novel. Karen Chase puts this well when she writes:

> *Middlemarch* is not held together finally by some overarching moral perspective; it is held together by *our* learning to perform many and diverse acts of sympathy. This is the moral of its method: that art, like human community, should seek not a unity that can reconcile life's multiplex variety, but should seek instead a sympathy prepared to adjust to all the irregularities of the human landscape.[97]

By situating interpretive distance and substantive frictions between her characters' respective visions of their relationships and one another, and by toggling readers back and forth between these perspectives, challenging initial impressions and illuminating a more complex picture in the overlap between conflicting points of view, Eliot works not only to depict the slow evolution of roving sympathy among her characters (most notably in Dorothea), but to provoke and encourage that kind of imaginative mobility on the part of her readers.

The plot and structure of *Middlemarch* interrogates the nature of human knowledge, challenging readers to move beyond the limits of their own sense of things toward an empathetic

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[95] *Middlemarch*, 278.
[96] *Middlemarch*, 264.
[97] Chase, *Middlemarch,* 42.

seeing-with and feeling-with others. It does this not only by means of the slow evolution of Dorothea toward the form of "incalcubly diffusive" empathy she embodies at the end of the novel, but also through the novel's gradual inclusion of diverse perspectives. These diverse perspectives encourage readers to move out from any single view of this web of relations, enabling them to hover over the consciousness of various characters and thus take in a more complex view of the web the novel describes. Here, tensions between the perspectives of individual narrators arise as a matter of course: they are not cause for suspicion, but a reflection of the way that human perception functions. These tensions serve as an invitation for readers to take in the world of the text in the same way they learn to navigate the complexities of their own world: coming to a consciousness of their own limited perspective by way of what they've unknowingly missed, and trying, responsively, to imagine their way into other ways of seeing, other centres of self.

In an essay published some years before she began to work on *Middlemarch*, Eliot wrote: "A picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves," claiming that art should be "a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."[98] If *Middlemarch* encourages a form of moral attention, then, it is analogous to the form of scholarly attention it commends by negative example: the movement out from one's own starting point toward the consideration of how things might appear from another point of view. This movement is more than the vague gesture toward human kindness we might read in Dorothea's quip near the end of the novel that "people are almost always better than their neighbours think they are."[99] Instead, the move beyond the short sightedness of our centripetal selves—our illusions of concentric circles that gather the known world into our orbit—has epistemological as well as moral weight, standing as a necessary prerequisite toward what Eliot elsewhere refers to as both "seeing truly and feeling justly."[100]

In a letter to her publisher John Blackwood, Eliot once remarked that she saw her novels as a "set of experiments in life."[101] David Carroll glosses Eliot's understanding of her fictional "experiments" as potent microcosms of the ordinary work of observation, the trial and error we find

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[98] George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Westminster Review* (1856): 51-56, 71,72.
[99] *Middlemarch,* 733.
[100] George Eliot to John Blackwood, July 12, 1857, in *The George Eliot Letters: 1869-1873,* ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, 405).
[101] Letter to John Blackwood, 1876, quoted by Diana Postlethwaite, "George Eliot and Science," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot,* 103.

in any attempt at understanding. "Each experiment proceeds by the testing, juxtaposing, comparing and contrasting of different ways of making sense of the world until coherence reaches its limit and breaks down into incoherence," Carroll writes, "This process is, in fact, what life is and it is never ending."[102] Here, Eliot's commitment to realism[103] is manifest not only in the way she sketches the everyday movements of her characters in a small, provincial town, but in her aspiration to render their relationships truthfully and to write honestly about the way that human perception works. Eliot's characters form hypotheses and proceed to read the world around them. Some of her characters allow their initial hypotheses to overly-influence their data—refusing any alternative. Others test their hypotheses against various experiments and various ways of seeing, allowing misunderstandings or the friction between conflicting readings to chasten their impressions and rework their sense of things.

This reworking appears in Eliot's novels as a form of attentive relationality. As Dorothea develops the capacity to move beyond the narrow window of her own perceptions and toward a sympathetic relation to others, she is able to see beyond appearances, and beyond the limits of her own impressions.[104] At the end of the novel, Dorothea directs her charitable impressions toward Lydgate, for example, when he is accused of receiving a bribe to kill a patient under the guise of medical care. Though her initial impulses are directed toward discovering the truth of his innocence, she feels a "melancholy check" to her "impetuous generosity" as she considers "all the circumstances of the case by the light of Mr. Farebrother's experience."[105] Still, the narrator tells us that "some of her intensest experience in the last two years had set her mind strongly in opposition to any unfavorable construction of others," so she goes to Lydgate herself to hear from him the whole truth of what happened, and thus gains the capacity to vindicate him, and free him from the binds of those half-truths that had first appeared to incriminate him.[106] In this way, George Levine claims that while the novel is full of scholars of all sorts, it champions Dorothea as "the better

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[102] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations*, 2.
[103] George Levine writes, "No single perspective can encompass reality…for realism to do its job it must allow for its incompleteness and disallow the possibility that any single person—the narrator included—can authoritatively interpret reality" ("Introduction: George Eliot and the Art of Realism," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot,* ed. George Levine [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 15).
[104] Rohan Maitzen writes, "*Middlemarch* challenges the assumption that a single point of view suffices for understanding. Just individual characters learn by rethinking what they have seen or done, the novel and its implied author enact the moral obligation to see things from a different angle" (Rohan Maitzen, "Martha Nussbaum and the Moral Life of *Middlemarch*" *Philosophy and Literature* 1 [2006]: 190-207).
[105] *Middlemarch,* 733.
[106] *Middlemarch,* 733.

scientist" for her capacity to move between variant ways of looking at an object of study and to test and refine her theories against the sundry particulars of experience.[107]

It is important to recognize that what leads Dorothea to true findings is not merely the rigors of the scientific method, but her own deep feeling about Lydgate's innocence. Here, science and sympathy function not merely analogously, but in dynamic partnership. It is Dorothea's "ardour" after all that leads her and her alone to go and test the truth of Lydgate's innocence. [108] It is her feeling that orients her attention, directs her toward further investigation, and informs her judgment. And while "great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion," in this context, Dorothea's feeling and faith, naïve as it might appear to others, allow her to discover the truth when other more detached observers were easily deceived by appearances.[109] Her experiences grappling with the frictions of her marriage and her initial blindness to her husband's suffering have bred in her a kind of moral knowledge that capacitates what Martha Nussbaum calls "the ability to miss less, to be responsible for more."[110] *Middlemarch* depicts Dorothea's long education in this form of empathetic ability and, by way of the tension between its own narrative perspectives, extends that education to its readers: inviting them to recognize what they might have missed in the hardness of Casaubon, learning a form of responsibility to others that begins in the imaginative and empathetic occupation of the world from other perspectival centers.

Eliot and the Bible

The plot of *Middlemarch* reveals that the study of provincial life, like the study of scripture, is fraught with interpretive difficulties. "Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them," Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, but so too in *Middlemarch* do marriages, scandals, business deals, and deaths.[111] We see and perceive in ways that diverge sometimes significantly from those around us, and we are often blind to the severity or the consequences of these divergences. Thus far, we have

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[107] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 271.
[108] *Middlemarch,* 735.
[109] *Middlemarch,* 838.
[110] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge,* 164. Gillian Beer writes, "In her work George Eliot constantly seeks *relations,* ways beyond the single consciousness" (Gillian Beer, "*Middlemarch* and the Lifted Veil," 94).
[111] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Poems* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1983), 473. Emerson writes, "Life is a train of moods like a strain of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus, From the mountain you see only the mountain. We animate what we can and we see only what we animate."

discussed the centrality of narrative frictions in *Middlemarch,* and specifically the role these frictions play in illuminating the interpretive challenges that characterize our common life: to read the world of *Middlemarch* truthfully (as either a character or a reader) one must come to see its conflicting narratives in "multiple but convergent vision"—learning how to move back and forth between opposing ways of looking in order to discover smaller, subtler truths in their overlap. What remains to be addressed, however, is how this novel's particular use of hermeneutic frictions might inform our study of similar frictions in biblical literature, and of the forms of reading that arise in response to these interpretive challenges.

Because *Middlemarch* dramatizes the rivalry between conflicting narrative accounts in the relationships between human persons, it brings into view certain affective dimensions of the hermeneutic process that may be harder to see in the work of biblical interpretation. By depicting in the lives of her characters the painful experience of finding once coherent worlds and relationships ruptured, Eliot foregrounds the disappointments and suffering that attend to our encounters with frictions in our interpretation of texts, as well. Frictions cut against our sense of things, threaten the order of the world (or the text) as we knew it. It is for this reason that Friedrich Schleiermacher claimed the whole goal of the hermeneutic enterprise as the art of *avoiding* misunderstanding, avoiding the painful clash or abrasion of one's own view against others.[112] In *Middlemarch,* we find that there are better and worse ways to avoid misunderstanding, better and worse responses to hermeneutic frictions.

In the first place, the recognition of misunderstanding occasioned by friction can have a hardening effect on interpreters, causing them to further solidify their sense of things over and against whatever threats incongruent evidence might pose to the unity of their impressions. Here, as in the case of Casaubon, the task of interpretation becomes the work of avoiding friction at all costs, the determination, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's terms "to exclude by controlled, methodical consideration whatever is alien and leads to misunderstanding."[113] This hardening can take a number of forms. On the one hand, this hardening can crystallize prior commitments against the forces of change. We see this kind of hardening in the interpretive work of scholars like Richard Moulton and Hans Frei, for example, who continue to proclaim the essential unity of the Biblical text over and against any "distracting" consideration of its disparate witness. Indeed, each of these scholars

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[112] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism,* 29.
[113] Hans Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 7.

produce their own narrow "synoptical tabulation" as an engagement with only one of the four gospels (lest textual variants confuse the matter). Hardening can also go the way of Casaubon or Julius Wellhausen, whose commitments to unity are turned toward Manichean applications: allowing suspicion to become the tie that binds such that certain acts or actors must be recast as subordinate or even evil in order to retain a sense of the good order.[114]

But the painful experience of encountering friction can also transform the way we read the world: leading us outside our own narrow understandings and self-serving blindnesses and opening us to new forms of seeing and knowing. We see this alternative approach to reading friction modeled in Dorothea's progression over the course of the novel. She slowly turns from her initial desires to see the world as a unified whole toward the kind of scholarly attention and human feeling that might "bruise itself unawares against discoveries."[115] Dorothea's model of reading moves beyond the negative edge of misunderstanding, revealing the recognition of frictions as a moment of "deep common accord" in Gadamer's terminology—a moment of recognition that allows something or some text or someone to be seen with clearer eyes than before.[116]

"We cannot give the young our experience," George Eliot once said, "They will not take it. There must be the actual friction of life, the individual contact with sorrow, to discipline the character."[117] That is, it is true in part that we learn to read both our lives and ourselves by way of learning to read literary texts as unities and so see the disparate and fragmented moments of our life as a kind of narrative whole, as Alisdair Macintyre suggested.[118] But it is also true that we learn to read both texts and our lives well by way of an honest reckoning with frictions, by attending to those niggling facts, words, and experiences that are not so easily resolved into our wider theories of the whole—theories that often accord with the way we wish to see. Hiding from those elements that emerge in the process of interpretation to threaten our previously established interpretive schema is not a recipe for understanding, but for self-deception, and the fossilization of our own interpretive blindnesses.

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[114] We see this also in the way that the residents of Middlemarch turn on Lydgate once rumors begin to spread about his financial deals with Bulstrode and his suspected involvement in the murder of Raffles while under his care.
[115] *Middlemarch,* 498.
[116] Hans Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," 7.
[117] Rosalind Howard, as quoted by Rebecca Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch,* 266.
[118] See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984).

Among his many aphorisms about the work of interpretation, Gadamer writes that hermeneutics involves "a genuine conversation [that] is never the one we wanted to conduct."[119] In the story of Dorothea, we witness both the tragic dimension of this aphorism—the disappointment of finding things not at all as we wanted—and its hopeful subtext: that there may be a way out of our centripetal selves, that we may find something more genuine that what it is we wanted. On this reading, frictions can and do have a revelatory effect in Dorothea's life, disclosing both her own persistent blindnesses and that which she was previously blind to, opening her to a more genuine encounter, first with her husband and then later with Lydgate and again with Rosamond.

The Bible, like the oscillating view of *Middlemarch*'s narrator, presents the same stories from different and occasionally conflicting perspectives. While these conflicts have had a hardening effect on both literary and theological readers of the Bible over the last century, who continue to insist on the essential unity of the text over and against evidence to the contrary, there may be a lesson in *Middlemarch* about how conflicts between narrative perspectives can become hermeneutically meaningful. In *Middlemarch,* frictions between narrative voices provide an education for both Dorothea and the novel's reader about the nature of human perception. These frictions reveal the limits of any single view, and call those who come up against perspectives contrary to their own toward forms of imaginative mobility that capacitate a wider sense of the world, and, at least potentially, a deeper knowledge of others. Rather than seeing the conflicts between the gospels as a threat to the integrity of what they represent, we might see the friction between their divergent perspectives as the substance of a similar education. If we see through a glass darkly, see the lines in pier-glass only in terms of our own candle's light, then we would do well to see by way of others: to see as Mark saw, as Luke saw, as John saw. On these terms, the differences between the gospel narratives might not be a sign of some textual frailty that should be "fixed" by strong-arming divergent voices into a unified whole; but neither are they a matter for history alone. Instead, the divergences between these narrative perspectives might testify to the remarkable aptitude of this mode of frictive discourse to render the nature of human perception in all its refracted light.

Interlude

[119] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad Publishing Corporation, 1989), 385.

We now move from *Middlemarch* to *Moby-Dick*—a novel that offers a slightly different setting for comparative study, taking us from sitting rooms in the English countryside to the decks of a whaling ship. While the subject matter of the latter text is markedly different from that of the former, these novels share a formal interest in foregrounding the juxtaposition of diverse perspectives and a larger thematic interest in the work of interpretation.

Midway through *Middlemarch,* the narrator makes a fleeting remark comparing the perceptive faculties of humans to that of animals—a comparison that will loom large over the text of *Moby-Dick*. After watching Lydgate's clumsy attempt to interpret his wife according to the "way of all women," the narrator muses that it is "this power of generalizing, which gives men the superiority in mistake over the dumb animals."[120] While the human capacity to build up from particular impressions toward general concepts is usually construed as an advantage, here *Middlemarch*'s narrator observes that this capacity also makes human interpreters prone to a form of error unknown to less rational animals, borne out of the reach for wider explanatory concepts that can just as easily warp and distort as clarify their perception of the particular.

Moby-Dick extends these meditations on the work of interpretation, allowing the study of whales to supply a different sort of curriculum for hermeneutic theory. Melville's study does even more to expose the frailties and limits of human understanding by presenting an object that is not simply another human consciousness, but instead something that hides in the deep and seems always to exceed our grasp, and foil any attempt to "draw out leviathan with a hook"—to name, paint or comprehend it.[121]

III. Moby Dick

In *Moby-Dick,* we meet another scientist—the novel's narrator, Ishmael—who makes a similar habit of looking at any object that garners his attention from multiple points of view. Midway through the novel, we find Ishmael standing on the deck of the *Pequod* between the heads of two different whales, absorbed in a comparative study of the anatomical distinctions between the eyes, ears and mouth of a sperm whale and that of a right whale. He moves back and forth from this comparison of two "folio leviathans" to a consideration of the more significant differences between the sense faculties of whales and that of human beings:

[120] *Middlemarch,* 592.
[121] Job 41:1

> The peculiar position of the whale's eyes, effectually divided as they are by so many cubic feet of solid head…must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him. Man may, in effect, be said to look out on the word from a sentry-box with two joined sashes for his window. But with the whale, these two sashes are separately inserted, making two distinct windows, but sadly impairing the view.
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> So long as a man's eyes are open in the light, the act of seeing is involuntary; that is, he cannot then help mechanically seeing whatever objects are before him. Nevertheless, any one's experience will teach him, that though he can take in an undiscriminating sweep of things at one glance, it is quite impossible for him, attentively and completely, to examine any two things—however large or however small—at one and the same instant of time; never mind if they lie side by side and touch eachother…How is it, then, with the whale? True, both his eyes, in themselves, must simultaneously act; but is his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man's, that he can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction? If he can, then it is as marvelous a thing in him, as if a man were able simultaneously to go through the demonstrations of two distinct problems in Euclid. Nor, strictly investigated, is there any incongruity in this comparison.[122]

While the visual faculties of whales first appear at a severe disadvantage to the wider, more all-encompassing perspective of human beings, Ishmael's meditation on the limitations of a whale's field of vision leads him to consider the limits of human sight. Though human beings can see everything all at once, experience teaches us that we are incapable of focusing on more than one thing at a time. In the end, Ishmael champions the whale's visual faculties, determining that whales may indeed perceive the world better than human beings in that their attention is somehow more "comprehensive, combining, and subtle"—always building sense impressions and knowledge in a mediating relationship between two or more distinct views.

This comparative study is an excellent example of the way Ishmael carries out his "practical cetology" throughout *Moby-Dick*, and at the same time it provides a hint toward his own

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[122] *Moby-Dick,* 360-361. In characteristic fashion, this panegyric to the visual faculties of a whale is immediately followed by an "on the other hand" reflection on a weakness native to whale anatomy, observing how the whale's "divided and diametrically opposite powers of vision" yields a "helpless perplexity of volition" that might account for the peculiar movement of a whale when confronted by "three or four boats," spread out in every direction (*Moby-Dick,* 361).

hermeneutic method.[123] To see and interpret the world better, more subtly, Ishmael insists that the human perceiver should not wish to "'enlarge" their mind, but rather to "subtilize it"—learning to see, in other words, a little more like a whale.[124] Over the course of the novel, Ishmael turns the whale's peculiar mode of seeing into a method of interpretation: setting multiple perspectives of any given object side by side and moving back and forth between these disparate images in order to arrive at a "comprehensive, combining" sense of the thing.

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville depicts a form of hermeneutic activity that operates on this model of whales: binding the production of meaning to a process of juxtaposing different ways of interpreting the objects of our attention—specifically those objects that seem to exceed our frameworks for understanding and push at the limits of our visual, linguistic and hermeneutic capacities. While *Middlemarch* interrogates the nature of human knowledge, challenging readers to move beyond the limits of their own sense of things toward an empathetic seeing-with and feeling-with others, *Moby-Dick* provides an account of the way human perception meets objects that exceed its grasp. Like the various genres juxtaposed together in the Bible that seek to do justice to the workings of God by means of poetry, narrative, law, history and prophecy, Ishmael makes use of any mode of attention or investigation he can get its hands on, juxtaposing them together as variant ways of seeing a single inscrutable object, trying with human language "to grope down into the bottom of the sea…to have one's hand among the unspeakable foundations…to hook the nose of this leviathan."[125]

Moby-Dick, the Bible, and the Work of Interpretation

Due perhaps to the metaphysical quality of the novel's prose, to its "elaborate parade of biblical allusions,"[126] Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has long been taken by its readers for "a sort of

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[123] *Moby-Dick*, 359.
[124] *Moby-Dick*, 362.
[125] *Moby-Dick,* 147
[126] Lawrence Roger Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 152. It is worth noting that Melville's innumerable literary allusions are not exclusively indebted to the biblical canon, and in fact extend to a rather wide range of literary sources (including Shakespeare, Milton, and Greek and Roman mythology). For more on the range of Melville's allusions as well as the slow evolution of his allusive style, see Allen Guttman, "From Typee to Moby-Dick: Melville's Allusive Art," *Modern Language Quarterly* 24 (1963): 237-245.

scripture" itself.[127] Since the novel's rise to prominence during the revival of Melville's work in the 1920s (almost seventy years after its initial publication[128]) scholars have tried to make sense of the intricate web of biblical references that permeate the pages of *Moby-Dick*.[129] As early as 1940, scholars began to publish catalogues of Melville's biblical allusions,[130] working to interpret the role of the Bible in this text in relationship to the forms of Calvinist piety that had occupied Melville's childhood, or to the conflicting claims he made in letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne during the composition of this text—that he had written both "a wicked book," and "the Gospels in this century."[131]

In the mid-twentieth century, studies of Melville's use of the Bible kept to long catalogues of the biblical themes and allusions found in his fictional work[132] along with broad, wooly claims about the amplifying effects of these references on his plots and prose.[133] Nathalia Wright, for example, argued that Melville's appropriation of Biblical tropes "magnifies his characters and themes, which are essentially simple and mundane, so that they appear larger and more significant than life."[134] Critics like Carlos Baker read Melville's use of the Bible in relationship to similar allusive styles in American authors like Mark Twain and Nathaniel Hawthorne who, while departing from conventional forms of faith, retained the language and imagery of the Bible as a useful tool for producing "a novel of great consequence for all thinking men."[135]

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[127] Lawrence Buell, "*Moby-Dick* as Sacred Text," in *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 53. For more on this claim about the "scriptural" status of *Moby-Dick*, see Robert Alter, "*Moby-Dick:* Polyphony," *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 42-77; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 9; Ilana Pardes, "Modern Literature," *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods,* ed. Ronald Hendel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 176; Zachary Hutchins, "*Moby-Dick* as Third Testament: A Novel 'Not Come to Destroy but to Fulfill' the Bible," *Leviathan* 13 (2011): 18-37.

[128] Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 11.

[129] These catalogues also include an interest in Melville's extensive references to the Christian theological tradition, and in particular those references likely derived from the New England Calvinism of his early upbringing. For more on this see T. Walter Herbert Jr., *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977); "Calvinist Earthquake: Moby-Dick and Religious Tradition," in *New Essays on Moby-Dick,* 109-140.

[130] Nathalia Wright, "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," *American Literature* 12 (1940): 185-200; Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1949). See also a more recent example of this cataloging practice: Gail H. Coffler, *Melville's Allusions to Religion: A Comprehensive Index and Glossary* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

[131] "Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1851"; "Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, November 1851" in *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence,* ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 192, 212.

[132] This interest in catalogues also extended to the markings and marginalia in Melville's personal Bibles. See Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible,* 9-11.

[133] See Allen Guttmann, "From Typee to Moby-Dick: Melville's Allusive Art," *Modern Language Quarterly* 24 (1963): 237-244; 244.

[134] Wright, "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," 198. Wright goes on to make the rather puzzling claim that this allusive habit of Melville's "suggests the existence of a world beyond the world of sense, which exerts influence upon this world and in which ultimate truth resides"—a claim that seems a strange fit for both Melville and this novel.

[135] Carlos Baker, "Place of the Bible in American Fiction," *Theology Today* 17 (1960): 53-76

In recent years, however, studies of the relationship between *Moby-Dick* and the Bible have moved on from catalogues of the novel's biblical allusions and generalizations about the amplifying capacity of Biblical language toward deeper considerations of the concrete ways in which this novel engages with debates internal to the world of biblical interpretation and biblical scholarship. Drawing attention to the novel's appropriation of a diverse range of interpretive discourses, scholars like Elisa New and Ilana Pardes began to examine Melville's epic as a kind of commentary on commentary itself, written in relationship to debates over the unity and authority of the biblical canon that loomed large as what New calls "the most formidable intellectual and spiritual challenge of the early nineteenth century."[136]

In her book *Melville's Bibles*, Ilana Pardes considers *Moby-Dick* as a product of Melville's aspiration "to comment on every imaginable mode of biblical interpretation."[137] Like the opening extracts of his sub-sub-librarian—which juxtapose together lines about whales from Shakespeare's "Hamlet," verses from biblical poetry and entries from J.R. MuCullouch's *Commercial Dictionary*—Pardes points out that *Moby-Dick* includes a similarly wide array of approaches to biblical interpretation, including homiletics, comparative mythology, allegory, biblical science, hymnody, higher criticism and systematic theology.[138] *Moby-Dick* offers its readers not only a meditation on the long and contested exegetical history of whales, but also on analogous contests and controversies in the realm of biblical interpretation, such that these parallel inquiries become symbolically fused over the course of the novel.[139] On Pardes' reading, the white whale is best interpreted not as an allegory for the unknown God or a shapeless sign of some inscrutable evil, but instead as "the grand

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[136] Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Elisa New, "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's Moby-Dick," *Poetics Today* 19 (1998): 281-303; 288. New adds: "The campaign for some semblance of scriptural unity filled the works of the men who were Melville's childhood pastors and spilled from issue to issue of the journals he made his quotidian reading…orthodox defenders of the Bible's literal truth fell prey to scholastic contortions… liberals, on the other hand, were beset by temptations to trim for the sake of the text's 'spirit,' or its applicability to the Christian life. And once the text was yielded to its applications, to criteria of relevance or meaning, once liberal scholars allowed themselves to excise just this or that small historically unpalatable fact as an interpolation or textual corruption, then the very fabric of revelation began unraveling…In sum, scholars of both stripes carrying the old Pauline banners of 'letter' and 'spirit' found themselves liable to be embarrassed by the very methods on which their dignity was staked, by the incoherence their methods wrought" (New, "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves!" 288-9).
[137] Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles,* 1. Pardes goes so far as to argue that "if *Moby-Dick* was largely misunderstood or ignored at the time of its publication in 1851 and discovered only in the 1920s and more substantively in the 1940s, it was, in part, because Melville's exegetical imagination was in many ways ahead of its time" (Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 9).
[138] Pardes, *Melville's Bibles,* 1-2. Phillip Hoare notes that Melville makes a similar use of a variety of different scientific discourses including whale anatomies, natural histories, and Darwin's early studies on evolutionary patterns he observed during his time in the Galapagos Islands. See Phillip Hoare, "Cetology: How Science Inspired Moby-Dick," *Nature* 493 (2013): 160-162.
[139] Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 3.

embodiment of the Bible."[140] And in their relentless, contested pursuit of this elusive object, Ishmael and his fellow crewmembers figure as the text's ever reading, ever warring, ever-errant interpreters.

Moby-Dick dramatizes the contests among his contemporaries between various modes of interpretation—along with their respective blindnesses, virtues, excesses, and failures—in the smaller acts of exegesis that run throughout the novel as well as in the larger structure of the novel as a whole. The text consistently presents the smaller objects of its attention in comparative perspective—drawing attention to the slight differences between various ways of seeing or interpreting Ahab's scar, a Spanish coin, or a cryptic painting. In this way, the narrative strategies surrounding the work of interpretation in *Moby-Dick* bear a strong resemblance to those we saw in *Middlemarch.* Both novels highlight hermeneutic activity (on the part of its characters or on the part of its readers) by juxtaposing diverse impressions of a given object. These juxtapositions are carefully facilitated by the novel's intervening narrators who encourage readers, in the words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* to "look here upon this picture, and on this,"[141]oscillating between diverse impressions and thus carefully structuring exegetical reflection within both novels as ever and always a "two-stranded lesson."[142]

In addition to the perspectival multivocalism that characterizes *Middlemarch* and *Moby-Dick,* Melville also offers his readers a multivocalism of genres or literary styles.[143] The novel presents itself in a scattered bricolage of scientific facts, historical excurses, lengthy monologues and biblical allusions laced through a seafaring adventure story with oddly metaphysical aspirations. Some chapters are framed as drama, others as prose, and still others as encyclopedic reference. While this structure frustrated many of the novel's early readers who accused its author of an unbridled and unorganized "extravagance,"[144] this larger patchwork structure mimics the form of attention

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[140] Pardes, *Melville's Bibles*, 17.
[141] Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 4; Howard Vincent makes the connection between Hamlet's invitation and Melville's method in *Moby-Dick* as he studies Ishmael's comparison of the two whale-heads in chapters seventy-four and seventy-five, writing "As any writer knows, nothing is more effective in description than a well-sustained comparison between two objects similar in kind but different in appearance" (Howard Vincent, *The Trying out of Moby Dick* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1980], 248).
[142] *Moby-Dick*, 47.
[143] Craig Svonkin, "Melville and the Bible: Moby-Dick; Or the Whale, Multivocalism, & Plurality," *Letterature D'America* 21 (2001): 53-73.
[144] "Review in London *Atlas*, November 1, 1851" from *Moby Dick as Doubloon: Essays and Extracts (1851-1970),* ed. Herschel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970), 13. The reviewer writes: "In all Mr. Melville's previous works, full of original genius as they are, there was to be found lurking a besetting sin of

encouraged by its smaller component parts. That is, the novel presents both its smaller investigations and its "mighty theme" from multiple angles in multiple forms, offering readers a realistic depiction of the connective, classificatory and self-correctional work of perception, exegesis and understanding. Andrew Delbanco writes that this strategy of Melville's made him one of the first writers to successfully depict the improvisational dimension of interpretation by composing a novel that reads "as spontaneous and self-surprising as the human mind itself."[145]

Whether Ishmael is trying to make out the identity of a peculiar shape in a hallway painting or trying to grasp the nature and scope of the colossal white whale toward which they are all helplessly headed, he narrates his studies slowly: accumulating data from one angle before pausing to insist that "you must look at this matter in other lights; weigh it in all sorts of scales." Once he has offered a different way of considering the object, he then interjects again, protesting, "but this is not the half; look again," repeatedly turning the reader's attention to fresh points of consideration. [146] Once the whale's spout has been considered (anatomically, biologically, mythically), Ishmael moves to consider the various utilities of a whale's tail (as a tool for forward propulsion, for example, or "as a mace in battle," or for playful sport in the open sea). This then leads him to consider the whale as a school or pack (and to speculate on the sexual and social realities of these traveling bands). As with that old myth about the blind men and the elephant, where the men stand on different sides of the creature and suppose it to be a rope, a snake, a pillar, based on which parts of the animal they happen to reach out and touch, Ishmael structures his studies of the whale so as to magnify the fact that the creature "begins to assume different aspects, according to your point of view."[147]

Richard Brodhead writes that as Ishmael ventures to become an apt chronicler of both whales and whaling, he "keeps feeling his way forward from one kind of explanation to another. And as he completes what would seem to be the climax of his explanation, he takes care to remember that no explanation can be fully sufficient to its object."[148] The novel itself similarly refuses to settle into any pattern of speech or any single way of looking except for the impulse to look again and reach beyond the bounds of one's previous experience and vocabulary—concepts

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extravagance…The book before us offers no exception to the general rule which more or less applies to all Mr. Melville's fictions…Extravagance is the bane of the book and the stumbling block of the author."

[145] Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work,* 146.

[146] *Moby-Dick,* 119. Ishmael makes a similar remark later in the text when comparing the endangerment of whales to that of buffaloes, pausing after a long excursus before shifting the angle of the reader's attention to say: "But you must look at this matter in every light" (*Moby-Dick,* 502).

[147] *Moby-Dick,* 364.

[148] Richard Brodhead "Trying All Things: An Introduction to *Moby Dick,*" in *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, 9.

suitable to land, perhaps, but ill-fit for the interpretive tasks these men will encounter on this particular oceanic voyage. For this reason, Delbanco claims that *Moby-Dick* is always working to convert language "from an inheritance into an invention," that it might use the known world in new ways to probe and plumb what is yet unknown. "What Melville's young men invariably discover at sea is the arbitrariness and limit of their previous idiom," Delbanco continues, "It always fails them quickly, and in the ensuing confusion, they grasp for new stabilities."[149]

The working assumption of *Moby-Dick,* of course is that it is better to "perish in that howling infinite" of shoreless and indefinite landlessness than to "craven crawl to land" in order to find oneself safely at home once more with one's familiar concepts and familiar ways of knowing.[150] The novel is ever and always reaching for new ways to see, crawling inside dead whales, dipping ship-biscuits in oil-pots to taste the flavor of the whale's spermaceti, or using the creature's dried skin as a translucent magnifying glass for bibliographic research.[151] The Leviathan's surplus of size, measure and meaning gives rise to variegated and endless modes of interpretation, each a reminder of the whale's stubborn excess and so each an invitation to look again at all that remains unknown.

The Key to all Cetologies

Though Ishmael's namesake never speaks within the pages of the Hebrew Bible, in *Moby-Dick* he is transfigured into a storyteller, who, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner,[152] commands our attention from the novel's first sentence and holds us captive to his various musings on history, science, art and mythology. He is by nature (though not profession) a comparative scholar—though his approach to his subjects more closely resembles the style of Middlemarch's unnamed narrator than the unfinished work of Mr Casaubon. Ishmael's method is *accumulative*—juxtaposing multiple interpretations of a single object in front of the reader (an object often obscured by poor lighting, mysterious inscriptions, or the darkness hovering over the surface of the deep), to see whether these conflicting interpretations might yield in their combination something greater than the sum of their parts.

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[149] Andrew Delbanco, "Melville's Sacramental Style," *Raritan* 12 (1993): 69-91; http://raritanquarterly.rutgers.edu/.
[150] *Moby-Dick,* 117. Hub Zwart writes, "Melville's novel can be read in various ways, but it is first of all an exercise in comparative epistemology" (Hub Zwart, *Understanding Nature: Case Studies in Comparative Epistemology* [Nijmegen: Springer, 2008], 81).
[151] Ishmael remarks "it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles" (*Moby-Dick,* 332).
[152] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1857). See also Adam Zachary Newton, "Narrative as Ethics," in *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

One of the first objects of study we encounter in the plot of *Moby-Dick*[153] is a large painting hung on the wall of the entryway at The Spouter Inn. By Ishmael's description, this painting is quite difficult to make out: "so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose."[154] Despite the poor lighting and ill-condition of the painting in question, Ishmael presses on to further study as he tries to determine its mysterious subject matter:

> What puzzled most and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through—It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale—It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements—It's a Hyperborean winter scene—It's the breaking up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. *That* once found out, and all the rest were plain. But stop; does it not bear a fair resemblance to a giant fish? even the great leviathan himself?[155]

Ishmael reasons, after dismissing a variety of "bright, but alas, deceptive" ideas about its contents, and subsequently accumulating "the aggregated opinions of many aged person with whom I conversed upon the subject," that the portentous black mass in the center of the painting must be a whale.[156] The curious description of Ishmael's encounter with this painting early in the novel initiates readers into a process they will watch over and over again as the plot of the novel unfolds: Ishmael slowly accumulates data and then subsequently tests and contests it, refining his reading with reference to additional modes of interpretation and variant ways of looking at his object of study—in this case going so far as to open one of the windows at the back of the entryway to see if he might set the painting's mysterious black mass in a new light.

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[153] Excepting of course the "Etymology" and "Extracts" that precede the narrative opening of the text.
[154] *Moby-Dick,* 13.
[155] *Moby-Dick,* 13-14.
[156] Kevin J. Hayes writes about this scene with the painting, arguing: "few episodes better illustrate Ishmael's characteristic thought process" (Kevin J. Hayes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 49.

We find a similar example of this kind of investigation in the multiple interpretations of Captain Ahab's mysterious scar proffered by his crew.[157] Ishmael is the first to read the scar, drawing a visual connection between the "slender rod-like mark" on Ahab and his memory of "that perpendicular seam" that lightning makes when it cracks open the bark of a tree.[158] While Ishmael admits that "no one could certainly say" what caused this mark, he still proceeds to catalogue the best guesses he'd heard of the scar's mysterious origins. One among the crew interpreted the scar as a kind of symbolic brand, forged late in life by "elemental strife at sea." To another—one who had heard of the scar, but never himself laid eyes on Ahab—the scar reads as the visible sign of an otherwise invisible reality: a birthmark that he imagines must stretch the length of the Captain—covering him "from crown to sole."[159] These varied guesses about the mysterious origin of Ahab's scar circle round the crew's gradual recognition that their captain is a "marked man."[160] And his inscrutable mark, like that of Abel's brother Cain, bears witness to the mysterious circumstances from which it sprung, the same circumstances that have now set Ahab and his crew on an ill-fated course that they have only just begun to grasp.[161]

We see the interplay of diverse readings again when Ishmael recounts the ways in which the crew came to interpret the Ecuadorian doubloon that Ahab promised to the first seaman to spot the white whale.[162] Ishmael first offers us his own attempt to make sense of "whatever significance might lurk" in the odd inscriptions that mark the coin. His interpretation is characteristically encyclopedic: detailing its composition ("purest, virgin gold"), its genus (numbered among "those noble golden coins of South America"[163]), and a lengthy account of its inscription (the words "REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO" stamped above an engraving of "three Andes'

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[157] For more on Ahab's scar, see James McIntosh, "The Mariner's Multiple Quest," in *New Essays on Moby-Dick,* 26
[158] *Moby-Dick,* 134.
[159] *Moby-Dick,* 134-135.
[160] Daniel Hoffman uses this term in reference to the varied accounts of Ahab's scar, but links it to the omens prophesied against Ahab's biblical namesake rather than Cain's mark.
[161] In the entry on "Cain" in John Kitto's *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature,* the author spends a good deal of time speaking about the mysterious nature of both God's mark on Cain and his initial judgment against his offering (before the later murder of his brother Abel), claiming, ""some degree of mystery attends to the immediate origin of his crime" (H. Stebbing, "Cain," *Kitto's Cyclopedia* Vol. 1, 366).
[162] *Moby-Dick,* 175-176. Ilana Pardes calls the account of the doubloon "one of the most palpable ars poetic-hermeneutic moments in *Moby-Dick*, not only because it displays the unending routes of exegesis through the rapid transitions from one beholder to another, but also because Ishmael moves from commentary on the exegetical excursions of different crew members to a reflection on Stubb's commentary on other commentators. Stubb, Ishmael seems to intimate, is not always a perceptive reader of his shipmates' minds or half utterances—the second mate's speculative observations seem to disclose his own disposition and interests. But what could be more intriguing than to hide behind another metacommentator and follow his ruminations?" (Pardes, *Melville's Bibles,* 165).
[163] *Moby-Dick,* 470-1.

summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac.")[164] He then begins to recount the crew's variegated interpretations of the mysterious coin. To Starbuck, the peaks are a sign of the sovereign Trinity, standing over a vale of death and darkness as "a beacon and a hope."[165] Stubb, on the other hand, requests an almanac from a crew hand to help him decipher the coin's strange zodiac markings. Flask sees nothing but "a round thing made of gold…worth sixteen dollars," a sum which he quickly converts into a market value of "nine-hundred and sixty cigars."[166]

When Ahab himself pauses to look, he founds "something ever egotistical" in these mountains—"three peaks as proud as Lucifer." He then begins to expound his interpretation, presumably aloud:

> The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.[167]

Ahab looks at the doubloon and sees himself in every part of it; but he also recognizes the way that this coin functions like a "magician's glass"—each man's interpretation reflecting a large part of the man himself. Here we are reminded of Eliot's meditation on "pier glass" which, much like Ahab's vision of the doubloon, reflects "the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement" around the "little sun" of self. [168] The exegete subtly shapes her own sense of what she sees, such that she is in some part reflected back to herself in the object. But here again as with the pier-glass, though the subject may distort the object of her attention, there is no vision outside of the subject. The solution is not to retire from one's interpretive labors but rather to follow the novel's characteristic interpretive method, embodied in this particular scene by Stubb. After offering his own interpretation of the coin, Stubb hides behind the try-works to spy upon the others, in the hopes that lending his ears to hear the readings of others might garner him more eyes to see this

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[164] *Moby-Dick,* 471.
[165] *Moby-Dick,* 472.
[166] *Moby-Dick,* 472, 474.
[167] *Moby-Dick,* 471.
[168] *Middlemarch*, 264.

multivalent object.[169] "There's another rendering now" Stubb muses from his hiding spot, "but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see."[170]

By transfiguring the prize doubloon into a "text," classifying whale species into different size "folios," interpreting the skin of a whale as a strange "hieroglyphics," and the internal anatomy of a cub whale as an object ripe for Ishmael's "reading," the novel foregrounds the studiously comparative disposition of its narrator along with the hermeneutic dimensions of ordinary experience. But what it does with whales, paintings and coins, the novel also does with texts—gathering together various ways that something might be read and setting these conflicting views into comparative light. Though the novel carries out this exercise with many different texts, its clearest and largest comparative study comes out of its extensive engagement with the story of Jonah, and more specifically with the interpretive discourses that push and prod at the Bible's own whaling chronicle.

Jonah Historically and Mythically Regarded

Though Father Mapple identifies Jonah as "one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the scriptures," this story is woven as woof throughout the whole of the novel. [171] Jonah makes his first appearance quite early in the novel, as the second citation among the "higgledy-piggledy" extracts of the sub-sub librarian.[172] Six chapters later, Jonah provides the inspiration for the hymnody and homily at the New Bedford whalemen's chapel, and he is subsequently the subject of many of Ishmael's onboard musings about the legendary history of whales and whaling, and of that privileged, hidden knowledge of the Leviathan's internal frame.[173]

Though references to Jonah run throughout the text, here I will focus on three different interpretive discourses that the novel takes up in its attempts to lend new life to this old story: comparative mythology, historical criticism, and hymnody. As Ishmael takes on each of these ways of reading the story of Jonah, he continues to present each individual exegetical strategy in comparative perspective, so that in the end, his engagement with the story of Jonah sets comparative

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[169] *Moby-Dick,* 474-475.
[170] *Moby-Dick,* 474.
[171] *Moby-Dick,* 47.
[172] *Moby-Dick,* xxv.
[173] Jonah also appears as a comic reference at several points in the novel—as in the bartender at the Spouter Inn that the customers call Jonah, who serves drinks out of what appears to have once been the gaping maw of a right-whale (*Moby-Dick,* 15).

studies themselves into comparative view, yielding one of the novel's most sophisticated attempts to emulate the ever-combining interpretive faculties of the noble Leviathan.

In the eighty-second and eighty-third chapters of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael steps away from the action above deck (a brief gam between the *Pequod* and a ship called *The Virgin*) to take down a meditation on what he has learned about the longer mythological history of whaling, and what he has gleaned from debates about the historicity of one these mythic traditions in particular—the biblical story of Jonah. Ilana Pardes helpfully illuminates the fact that much of the material that appears in these two chapters also appears in the entry on "Jonah" found in John Kitto's then popular *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*.[174] While Kitto's 1845 *Cyclopedia* is credited with successfully bringing the fruits of German biblical scholarship to English and American lay readers in Melville's time, the entry on Jonah—composed by Scottish clergyman John Eadie—takes up a defensive posture against those who would claim that the Jonah narrative was "unhistorical."[175] Deploying zoological research and a brief foray into comparative mythology, Eadie makes a case for the historicity and primacy of Jonah's narrative. Melville takes up this material—both the arguments that Eadie himself advanced as well as those he vigorously opposed—and assembles these varied historical and mythological approaches to the story of Jonah toward a slightly different end.[176]

In the first of the two chapters—"The Honor and Glory of Whaling"—Ishmael presents his reader the fruit of his own long investigations into the trope of the whale in Greek, Roman and Hindu mythology, and the relationship of these mythic traditions to the story of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible.[177] The first stages of the chapter proceed in the fashion of Casaubon's *Key to All Mythologies*: an excursus into the story of Perseus and his legendary slaying of the whale is brought into relation with the biblical Jonah by explaining that a pagan temple in Joppa—the city from which Jonah set sail—was said to have contained the skeleton of Perseus' whale, suggesting a possible genealogical connection between these two stories.[178] But the chapter quickly departs from this mode of genealogical speculation, continuing to compare various mythological traditions, but

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[174] John Eadie, "Jonah," *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature,* ed. John Kitto (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1845), 142-144. Ilana Pardes makes first makes this connection between Kitto's *Cyclopedia* and the Jonah material in *Moby-Dick*. See Ilana Pardes, *Melvile's Bibles,* 46-72.

[175] Howard Vincent writes that Kitto's Cyclopedia was "standard decoration for English and American parlor tables" (Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1980], 271.

[176] While Melville's two adjacent chapters on Jonah bear the clear marks of Kitto's influence, Vincent also points to the influence of Pierre Bayle's controversial *Dictionary Historical and Critical* (See Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick,* 271-277).

[177] *Moby-Dick,* 397.

[178] *Moby-Dick,* 396.

demonstrating no commitment to the primacy of the Hebrew text. In his examination of Greek mythology for example, Ishmael announces: "by the best contradictory authorities, this Grecian story of Hercules and the whale is considered to be derived from the still more ancient Hebrew story of Jonah and the whale and vice versa; certainly they are very similar."[179] The chapter ends by claiming that the "head-waters" of this mythological fraternity emerge not with Jonah, nor with Hercules, but with the Hindu deity Vishnu,[180] who becomes "incarnate in a whale" in order to retrieve the precious Vedas which had fallen to the bottom of the sea.

This brief foray into comparative mythology links the text of Jonah to that of many better-known heroes and gods the world over, working to magnify the glory of the Jonah's three day sojourn in the belly of a whale by placing him among the ranks of "so emblazoned a fraternity" of legendary whalers,[181] going so far as to forge a link between Jonah and another tradition's salvific story of divine incarnation. At the same time, this comparison also modulates the far-fetched qualities of the Jonah story by placing it among a number of taller and even more miraculous tales, tempering doubts about the historical veracity of Jonah's narrative by claiming (at the beginning of the following chapter) that the skepticism of the Ancient Greeks and Romans regarding the historicity of Hercules' or Arion's ventures with whales "did not make those traditions one whit the less facts, for all that."[182]

In the subsequent chapter—"Jonah Historically Regarded"—Ishmael moves from comparative mythology to a series of objections by an old whaler named Sag Harbor to the literal historicity of the Jonah, offering readers a comic précis of higher critical objections to the story's truth alongside equally comical defenses of the historical and scientific realities of Jonah's subaquatic exile. Ishmael explains that Sag Harbor's suspicions about the veracity of this text were not aided by the Bible's ignorant illustrators. "He had one of those quaint old-fashioned Bibles, embellished with curious, unscientific plates; one of which represented Jonah's whale with two spouts in his head"—a peculiarity native to a very particular kind of whale, with a mouth so small it would choke on a penny roll, let alone a drowning sailor.[183] By way of reply to this objection, another character is introduced —Bishop Jebb, a figure cited by Eadie in his entry on Jonah[184]—who replies that Jonah

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[179] *Moby-Dick,* 397.
[180] Or, by Melville's spelling,"Vishnoo". *Moby Dick,* 397.
[181] *Moby-Dick,* 395.
[182] *Moby-Dick,* 399.
[183] *Moby-Dick,* 399
[184] Kitto, 143.

need not have been *swallowed* by the whale exactly, but only lodged for a time in its mouth. Sag Harbor then proceeds on to other objections, regarding Jonah's ability to have travelled from the Mediterranean Sea to Nineveh by way of the Tigris River in only three days,[185] or considering the destructive capacity of a whale's gastric juices, to which anonymous German exegetists reply that Jonah may have taken refuge in the belly of "a dead whale." Others add that Jonah might have come aboard a ship that *looked* like a whale, or perhaps one that was simply named after a whale.[186]

The debate between Sag Harbor and Bishop Jebb in the second chapter yields yet another window into this narrative. By considering the ways in which the literal sense of this story can be bent in order to accommodate claims to its literal historicity (against geographical or anatomical evidence to the contrary), we arrive at some rather amusing alternative readings of this narrative: imagining Jonah safely lodged in the bloated belly of a dead whale, floating at some speed up the Tigris river, or else in the hold of some other ship that just happened to be making its way to Nineveh.

These paired chapters expand the scope and sense of the Jonah story, placing it alongside a host of other miraculous whaling narratives and imagining a variety of alternative figurations for Jonah's miraculous rescue. While the critical literature on these two chapters seems to agree that Melville is parodying some mode of biblical exegesis, they disagree in significant ways about the object of these parodies. Thomas Bolin writes, "it is clear that Melville is in reality satirizing those who would hold for Jonah's historicity."[187] Hennig Cohen, on the other hand, claims that this is "a comic refutation of contemporary biblical scholars whose historical arguments cast doubt on the spiritual import of the book of Jonah."[188] Masafumi Yoneyama goes in yet another direction, arguing the true object of Melville's satire is the hermeneutic techniques of the Unitarians.[189] This confusion might lead a reader to conclude that the joke is on the work of biblical interpretation itself. [190]

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[185] To this objection, Sag Harbour adds that the waters of the Tigris when they approach the shores of Nineveh would be "too shallow for any whale to swim in" (*Moby-Dick,* 400).
[186] *Moby-Dick,* 400.
[187] Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 34.
[188] Hennig Cohen, "'Why Talk of Jaffa?': Melville's *Israel Potter,* Baron Gros, Zummo and the Plague," in *Savage Eye: Melville and the Visual Arts* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1991), 163.
[189] Masafumi Yoneyama, "Melville's Critique of Unitarianism in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*," *Studies in American Literature* 36 (2000): 15-35.
[190] Brian Yothers also points out that Melville's critique of Biblical criticism was two-sided, adding a few additional objects of Melville's playful critique to this list. On the one hand "Melville ridicules readings of the Bible that do not attend to the contradictions of the text," but on the other, he also equally mocks those "that insist on taking passages as

Perhaps in the end these chapters serve as a comic meditation on the vanities of biblical exegesis, a study of Jonah proffered by a lowly scribe, "full of Levianthan-ism, but signifying nothing."[191]

But as Ishmael might say, "this isn't the half of it, look again," redirecting our attention to one of the novel's earlier references to the story of Jonah which may help to set the comparative method of the novel's engagement with exegetical strategies in another light. Here, in the reimagined text of a classic hymn, Melville demonstrates in clearer terms how conflicting readings can be hermeneutically productive, driving us further into a story by helpfully defamiliarizing its contents and encouraging readers to look again.

Jonah's Hymn

When Ishmael goes to the whaleman's chapel in New Bedford before shipping off with the crew of the *Pequod*, he is greeted by a peculiar song in the first minutes of the service—a song that appears to be Melville's own attempt at hymnody. This hymn is an odd creation. It is the product of a long chain of transmission: from a poetic text that appears in both Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel, to a hymn composed by Isaac Watts in the early eighteenth century,[192] to Melville's own creative adaptation of this liturgical text.[193]

Melville combines the text of Watt's hymn with images and language from a prayer that Jonah utters from the belly of the whale, appropriating large sections of these hymns of thanksgiving while counterpointing their joy with a darker, more foreboding melody. While Jonah's prayer is typically interpreted along the lines of Watt's hymn as a sinner's gracious response to God's divine intervention, Melville reads this prayer in Jonah's second chapter in relationship to the deep anger that Jonah expresses toward God in book's often overlooked fourth chapter. Reading the second and the fourth chapters of Jonah together, Melville revises this hymn, offering us a new reading of the tensions that might animate Jonah's conflicted memory of this theophany. By leaning into these

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scientific rather than poetic truth" (Brian Yothers, *Sacred Uncertainty: Religious Difference and the Shape of Melville's Career* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015], 81)

[191] *Moby-Dick,* 157.

[192] Though Watts' contributions to this hymn go unnamed in the text of *Moby-Dick*, there are dozens of copies of Watts' hymnal aboard the *Pequod* when it sets sail. Ishmael informs us early in the novel that Bildad's wife Charity "had placed a small copy of Watts in each seaman's berth" (*Moby Dick,* 112).

[193] For a more extended treatment of the relationship between Melville's hymn and that of Isaac Watts, see David Battenfield, "The Source for the Hymn in Moby-Dick," Duke University Press: *American Literature* 27 (1955): 393-396. Steven Olsen-Smith, "The Hymn in Moby-Dick: Melville's Adaption of Psalm 18" *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 5 (2003): 29-47.

tensions in the composition of this hymn, and allowing them to animate the narratives that follow, Melville provides us one way to consider the generative potential of hermeneutic frictions.

"Thee Will I Love, O Lord My Strength" Isaac Watts, 1719	*Melville's Hymn* Herman Melville, 1850
Thee will I love, O Lord, my strength My rock, my tower, my high defence Thy mighty arm shall be my trust: For I have found salvation thence.	
Death and the terrors of the grave Spread over me their dismal shade; While floods of high temptations rose, And made my sinking soul afraid.	The ribs and terror of the whale, Arched over me a dismal gloom, While all God's sunlit waves rolled by, And left me deepening down to doom.
I saw the opening gates of hell With endless pains and sorrows there, Which none but they that feel can tell While I was hurried to despair. In my distress I called my God When I could scarce believe him mine He bow"d his ear to my complaints; Then did his grace appear divine.	I saw the opening maw of hell, With endless pains and sorrows there; Which none but they that feel can tell— Oh, I was plunging to despair. In black distress, I called my God, When I could scarce believe him mine, He bowed his ear to my complaints— No more the whale did me confine.
With speed he flew to my relief, As on a cherub"s wing he rode Awful and bright as lightning shone The face of my deliverer, God.	With speed he flew to my relief, As on a radiant dolphin borne; Awful, yet bright, as lightning shone The face of my deliverer God.
Temptations fled at his rebuke Dispelled by his almighty breath: He sent salvation from on high And drew me from the depths of death.	
Great were my fears, my foes were great Much was their strength, and more their rage But Christ my Lord is conqueror still In all the wars that devils wage.	
My song forever shall record That terrible, that joyful hour And give the glory to the Lord Due to his mercy and his power.	My song forever shall record That terrible, that joyful hour; I give the glory to my God His all the mercy and the power.[194]

Watts takes a psalm of thanksgiving that appears in its narrative context in 2 Samuel[195] as a prayer of David and transforms the story of David's deliverance from his enemies to fit the situation of the

[194] Melville, *Moby Dick,* 46-47.

ordinary sinner in need of redemption.[196] In "Thee Will I Love, Oh Lord my Strength," the Psalmist's references become generalized toward the everyman. The enemies who appeared to David as "floods of ungodly men,"[197] are now internalized in Watts' hymn as "floods of high temptation."[198] The theophany of the fearful God who "makes darkness his hiding place"—sending smoke from his nostrils and fire with his voice—is now manifest in the conquering salvation of "Christ my Lord" over "all the wars that devils rage."[199]

As Melville adapts Watts' hymn for use at the New Bedford chapel, he forges a new narrative context for this prayer, re-particularizing this hymn of hope for the everyman in the figure of Jonah. "The death and terrors of the grave" become re-concretized in Melville's text as "the ribs and terrors of the whale." The entrance to hell is not by way of any "gates" but instead through the whale's gaping "maw." The subject of the hymn is not merely "hurried to despair," but is rather "plunging," drowning into a distress that Melville makes "black" as the ocean's depths.

Melville's references to the story of Jonah also redirect the theological emphasis of Watts' hymn, exchanging a story of internalized struggle with temptation for a direct confrontation with God. Jonah begins his prayer with an honest declaration in direct address: "*you* cast me into the deep"—identifying the raging waters around him not with some earthly foe, but with the fearful will and power of God ("all your breakers and waves passed over me.")[200] Melville retains Jonah's identification of his suffering with the will of God as he composes his own hymn, transposing a personal battle with temptation to a cry of dereliction ("While all God's sunlit waves rolled by/And left me deepening down to doom"). While Watts' protagonist is rescued from "devils" and "foes," Melville's hymn re-imagines God as both the perpetrator and the savior of the speaker in his despair.

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[195] For more on the relationship between Psalm 18 and what appears to be a slightly earlier version of this poetic text in 2 Samuel, see Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, "A Royal Song of Thanksgiving: II Samuel 22=Psalm 18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 15-34.

[196] Watts was concerned that the hymns of his time failed to speak to the lives of everyday Christians. "It is necessary to divest David and Asaph, etc. of every other character but that of a psalmist and a saint, and to make them ways speak the common sense of the Christian," desiring that his hymns would be "homiletical rather than liturgical" (Isaac Watts, Preface to *Psalms of David imitated in the Language of the New Testament* [London: Frederick Westly and A.H. Davis, 1834], viii).

[197] The term here translated as "ungodly" is בליעל, which is notoriously difficult to translate. See D. Winton Thomas, "*bᵉliyya'al* in the Old Testament," in *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey,* ed. J. Neville Birdsall and Robert W. Thomson (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 11-19.

[198] "Psalm 18" *The Psalms and Hymns of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America* (Philadelphia: Mentz & Rovoudt, 1850) 34-35.

[199] "Psalm 18" *The Psalms and Hymns of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in North America,* 34-35.

[200] Jonah 2:3. Translation mine.

To a similar end, Melville makes a subtle adjustment to the end of Watts' theophany, transposing Watts' description of the deliverer God's face from "Awful and bright" to "Awful, *yet* bright." The God of Melville's hymn is no longer "awful" in Watts' archaic sense, in which the two descriptive terms "awful" and "bright" work together to form the same impression of the face of God. Instead, the God who Melville imagines coming to Jonah's rescue is awful, terrifying, even as he is bright. In this way, Melville draws out some of the more frightening imagery in the Psalm that Watts' hymn covered over—his voice in "hailstones and coals of fire," the earth shaking and the mountains trembling, for "he was wroth."[201] This small adjustment—the exchange of "and" for "yet"—may also alter the meaning of the hymn's final stanza. Though Melville directly copies the last stanza almost line for line,[202] his direct appropriation of Watts' "that terrible, that joyful hour," may have changed its meaning. While Watts assumedly intended this as a dramatic contrast between two moments in time: a "terrible" tribulation followed by a "joyful" rescue, in Melville's adaptation, these words appear to describe *the same moment*—both equally true descriptions of how Jonah might remember this encounter.

This conflicted memory of the terms of Jonah's rescue that concludes Melville's hymn might help us see a deeper connection between the second and fourth chapters of Jonah: between Jonah's pious prayer and God's miraculous rescue in the second chapter and the deep resentment that Jonah evinces toward God in the book's less referenced conclusion, when he declares himself "angry enough to die."[203] While those who employ this story as allegory are less likely to reach for the contents of a final chapter that cuts back against a linear reading of Jonah's sin and subsequent repentance, Melville's hymn considers the ways in which this fourth chapter might prompt re-readings of the whole by coming into dynamic tension with Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving and shedding new light on his experience of this theophany. It also invites readers to consider what might lie beyond the final words of this text: God rebukes Jonah for his baseless anger, and there the book ends—we never hear Jonah's reply.

While the sermon that follows this hymn does not exegete this last chapter, the remainder of Melville's novel will. What we know of Ahab begins where Jonah's story ends, exploring what might have happened if God's reproof in the final verses of this text was not enough to quench the anger

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[201] Psalm 18:13, 7 (KJV).
[202] The only changes Melville makes in this final stanza are slight grammatical shifts that smooth out the last two lines of the hymn. While Watts writes "And give the glory to the Lord/Due to his mercy and his power," Melville changes this to "I give the glory to the Lord/His all the mercy and the power."
[203] Jonah 4:9

of the one who has struggled with the whale and lived. Ahab's fury over his own violent unmasting is unchecked by rebuke, unmitigated by the miraculous nature of his own rescue. Ahab comes to identify with the whale "not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" such that the white whale becomes "the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them."[204] His maddened mind is always back on the whale, and so his body must go that way, too.

By one reading, Ishmael models a different way to return to the whale, a different form of interpretive absorption. After his own encounter with the whale and miraculous rescue (which we only learn about on the final page of the novel), Ishmael returns to the whale not as a hunter but as a chronicler, seeking to expound this "mighty theme" from all sides.[205] Humbled by the mammoth size of his subject matter, he combines all the scientific, historical and artistic research he can get his hands on, interspersing these studies with practical, philosophical and personal reflections from his own experience as a whaler. "I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans," he writes, "I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try."[206]

Ishmael faithfully chronicles the *Pequod*'s pursuit of the whale, taking down Ahab's mad fury, along with the moments in which some "wild, mystical sympathetic feeling" seemed to make that madness his own.[207] But at the same time he reflects on the dual nature of this symbol that only ever appears to Ahab as malice. He turns from Ahab's monomaniacal declaration of enmity against this whale as a sign of "intangible malignity"[208] to a meditation on that mysterious "spiritual whiteness" of whales, which somehow combines the widest and most divergent sensibilities: "that divineness had that in it which, though commanding worship, at the same time enforced a certain nameless terror."[209] This whiteness was "at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things" and "the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind."[210] The dynamic tension between conflicting readings and conflicting symbolic registers supplies the force of the white whale's mysterious "incantation," the reason "why it appeals with such power to the soul."[211] It is this incantation of an object of study that exceeds our every attempt to name it—an incantation powered

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[204] *Moby-Dick,* 200.
[205] *Moby-Dick,* 497.
[206] *Moby-Dick,* 147.
[207] *Moby-Dick,* 194.
[208] *Moby Dick,* 200.
[209] *Moby-Dick,* 207.
[210] *Moby-Dick,* 212.
[211] *Moby-Dick,* 212.

by the friction between opposing ways of looking, that drives Ishmael on as he works to accumulate more and more ways of seeing, more materials for study, more angles of reflection.

Unlike the narrow approach to interpretation figured in the madness of his captain, Ishmael's accumulative method is an ever-moving process, never finalized in some stable image or systematic impression of the whole, but always open to new insights. In his famous "Cetology," chapter, as Ishmael attempts to provide his reader a "systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera," he writes, "I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete must for that very reason infallibly be faulty."[212] Ten pages later, he returns to these sentiments:

> It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copstone to posterity.[213]

Ishmael insists that interpretive work—encyclopedic or otherwise—must remain open; it must strive to preserve the tasks of interpretation for posterity. It must leave the disputation at the end of Jonah's text unresolved, maintain the tensions between this book's second and fourth chapters, and allow multiple, convergent ways of looking at this story to remain the kind of flint and steel that continues to spark new readings. This is another way to read what Father Mapple identifies at the end of his sermon as the "other lesson" of Jonah's two-stranded tale: the pilot-prophet must not dull the word of God, for "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil onto the waters when God has brewed them into a gale."[214]

While the theological tensions of Melville's hymn may provide us a clearer example of how hermeneutic frictions can become productive in the work of interpretation, the novel's more comical exegetical excurses function on similar terms. Ishmael's mythological and historical studies disclose in their comparative relations new ways of looking at the story of Jonah. In the latter case, the pressure of doubts against the desire to cling the literal historicity of this story yield imaginative re-readings of this text—readings that try to retain the wonder of this story while reinventing ways it might closer align with the laws of science or geography—envisioning Jonah making his way to

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[212] *Moby-Dick,* 147.
[213] *Moby-Dick,* 157.
[214] *Moby-Dick*, 54.

Nineveh in a dead whale's floating carcass, or somehow circumnavigating Africa in three days time. Here, as in Melville's hymn, juxtaposing two different ways of looking gives rise to thought, to new readings generated in the frictive relationship between two angles of vision and two interpretive horizons.

These comparative studies yield in their comparative relation a wide and portentous vision of this object, and at the same time a reminder that this Leviathan exceeds any attempts to comprehend its excessive mass. This excess is the source of the whale's incantatory powers, the siren that continues to draw its interpreters further up, further in. As Ishmael himself concludes, after surveying the attempts of artists over the centuries to render a true portrait of the whale:

> Any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan.[215]

If Ishmael realizes that no picture of the whale does justice to the whale—why does he continue in the wake of this realization to offer his land-bound readers ever-new ways of looking at the Leviathan? Why does this realization push Ishmael not to silence but to hundreds of pages of further attempts to interpret and represent this whale?

There is a way in which Ishmael's accumulative method might be read as a particular kind of *via negativa*, a way to name the whale's innominablity by way of a vast accumulation of names—a way, in the words of Denys Turner, "to achieve the apophatic by means of a surplus of the cataphatic."[216] This kind of apophaticism moves not by way of denial, but rather by multiplied affirmation, in such a way that these variegated affirmations mark their own insufficiency to name the object of their common attention, and at the same time drive contemplation further, as they point to all the things that yet remain unsaid, "unpainted to the last." [217] In this way, Ishmael's

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[215] *Moby-Dick*, 289.
[216] Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 25. I am grateful to Joseph Lenow for helping me see the connection between Melville's method of studying the whale and the way in which Turner characterizes Julian's method of speaking about God.
[217] *Moby-Dick*, 289.

approach to naming and narrating the whale is careful to "leave the copstone to posterity": preserving this interpretive task for future generations as something that will always, blessedly, never be complete.[218]

Moby-Dick and the Bible

Several years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville took a tour in the east that he would later recount in his epic poem *Clarel* as a "pilgrimage in the holy land."[219] On one particular day of his journey, Melville spied the island of Patmos from his boat. Finding himself unable to see this place as the literal location of John's revelatory visions,[220] he recorded the following somber reflections in his journal:

> Was here again afflicted with the great curse of modern travel—skepticism. Could no more realize that St. John had ever had revelations here, than when off Juan Fernandes, could believe in Robinson Crusoe according to De Foe. When my eye rested on arid heigth, spirit partook of the barrenness.—Heartily wish Niebuhr and Strauss to the dogs.—The deuce take their penetration & acumen. They have robbed us of the bloom. If they have undeceived anyone—no thanks to them.[221]

While not disputing the "penetration & acumen" of scholars like D.F. Strauss or Barthold Niebuhr—a man who laid the foundation for the "constructive skepticism" that went on to set the terms for historical critical scholarship—Melville still faults them for the life they have drained from these texts in the process of clearing away their fictional or mythological aspects and tossing out any apparent contradictions as a sign of poor editing or bad history. We are left undeceived, perhaps, but standing over the dry bones of what was once a powerful story.

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[218] *Moby-Dick,* 157.

[219] Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Herschel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1876; reprint, Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1991).

[220] He expresses a similar sentiment when passing Cyprus: "From these waters rose Venus from the foam. Found it as hard to realize such a thing as to realize on Mt. Olivet that from there Christ rose" ("February 2, 1857," *The Writings of Herman Melville: Journals,* ed. Howard Horsford with Lynn Horth [Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1989], 95).

[221] "February 5, 1857," *Journals,* 97. Quoted by Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005). Barthold Niebuhr laid the foundation for the "constructive skepticism" that sits at the root of German historical scholarship. Niebuhr developed methods that allowed scholars to analyze sources and discard the worthless, unreliable materials such that the historical facts that stood behind these distortions could be reconstructed. See Peter Hanns Reill, "Barthold Georg Niebuhr and the Enlightenment Tradition," *German Studies Review* 3 (1980): 9-26.

If certain habits of reading and interpretation have robbed these texts of their bloom, can we find our way back toward their surprising, upending, revelatory powers? "*Can these dry bones live?*"[222] Melville's hymn provides one answer—a form of reading that removes the oily gloss from the surface of the text in order to recognize the gale below the waters, the *tohu va vohu* over which the spirit of God hovers.[223]

This form of reading—the juxtaposition of different and often conflicted ways of seeing the objects of our attention that draws us into a more "fully invested" sense of realities that seem beyond our grasp—is modeled not only by Ishmael, but also by the Bible itself, in the nature of its composition.[224] In the next chapter, we will consider how the story of creation, of the first revelation, of the history of Israel as a kingdom, of the life and death of the son of God, are all narrated in multiple ways, from multiple angles, presumably from the point of view of multiple human interpreters.[225] These twice-told tales (or fourfold narratives, in the case of the gospels, or certain theories of the composition of the Pentateuch) preserve the difficulties in thinking about the nature of human life, the mystery of divine revelation, the goodness of God in a world that often feels weighed by forces of evil and suffering. The hermeneutic friction that the redactors frequently maintain between biblical narrators' variant understandings preserves for every successive generation the interpretive tasks of which these internally conflicted narrative texts are a product.

As in Melville's hymn, these frictions between variant ways of narrating these stories serve to remind us that our knowledge about God and about our identity as human creatures is never final, but always open to new readings, new ways of describing a reality that the Bible acknowledges at once as present in our world and our language and at the same time beyond us. In the early pages of the novel, Melville remarks, "Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters, observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air."[226] For this reason, the Bible like Ishmael asks us to "look at this matter in other lights; weigh it in all sorts of scales,"[227] for here in this frictive composition, the frailties of human perception meet the grandeur of God.

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[222] Ezekiel 37:3
[223] Genesis 1:2
[224] *Moby-Dick,* 495.
[225] These hermeneutic frictions will be further explored in my subsequent chapter.
[226] *Moby-Dick*, 42.
[227] *Moby-Dick*, 119.

Chapter Six | *Reading Friction in Biblical Literature*

Why is this scripture so unclear? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we go about it by telling him a riddle whose solution will be the warning?—But who is to say that the Scripture really is unclear? Isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to 'tell a riddle'?[1]

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 32.

I. Introduction

In the first four chapters, we considered a brief history of biblical interpretation, focusing on attempts over the last century to read the Bible as a literary text. This history illuminated the narrow terms of literary interpretation that have guided literary guides to the Bible and theological readings of biblical narrative for the last century. In reaction to the attempts of higher critics to offer literary and theological readings of the frictions between biblical narrators that implicitly demeaned large portions of the canon as errant or inauthentic, literary readers of the Bible made unity and coherence the guiding principles of the Bible's literary interpretation, yielding the interpretation of these textual frictions to historical scholarship and exiling them from the realm of literary inquiry, as well as theological reflection on biblical narrative. In the fifth chapter, I looked at two literary texts that depict conflicts between narrators not as a problem for literary interpretation, nor still as a way to adjudicate between more or less reliable narrative testimony, but as a source of literary meaning and a way to interrogate the nature of human perception and the production of knowledge.

I have, in other words, offered a reading of what was *not* said about the Bible as a literary text (by higher critics, literary readers and narrative theologians), and a reading of what *might* have been said (with reference to similar literary phenomena in nineteenth century novels). While this narration is certainly valuable on its own terms, it stands as a prolegomena to a new form of literary reading: a way to encounter the hermeneutic frictions between biblical narrators as sites for both literary and theological reflection. It is to this task, and to a discussion of the dynamics of genre as a way to read the place of frictions in hermeneutic activity that I now turn.

II. Creation

In the beginning there are two stories, two accounts of the creation of the world.[2] Twice we watch as God creates human beings, twice we watch God form the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, twice we watch plants and trees rise for the first time from the ground.

[2] There are of course more than two stories in the Bible about the creation of the world. We find additional narratives in the books of Job and Isaiah, and scattered throughout the Psalms. Here I am focusing on the two creation narratives that are juxtaposed at the beginning of Genesis, in its first three chapters, though certainly these reflections might extend to the dialectical relationship between these narratives and the other canonical creation stories, as well.

In the first story, the world begins with water and the spirit of God hovering over its depths. God separates the mass of water into that which falls from the skies above and that which pools in the seas below, and then God parts the water to create dry land. God creates the heavens and the earth in ordered sequence, pausing after each creative act to call the birds and the stars and the dry land "good." In this first story, God stands at some distance from the world, creating (ברא/*bārā*)[3] with words. "Let there be light," God says, and the text tells us that light appeared, as if at that very instant.[4] God creates human beings—male and female—in God's image, and blesses them, making them caretakers of the order of creation and commissioning them to multiply and fill the earth. This story ends with God resting, and hallowing that day of rest, once God has declared all the works of creation to be "very good."[5]

In the second story, the world begins not with water but on arid ground that has yet to see rain. We remain on the ground throughout this second narrative, with no mention of sun or stars or sky. We watch as God waters the ground with a mist and plants a garden in the ground called Eden. We watch as God makes a single human creature from the ground, as God walks on the surface of the ground "in the cool of the day."[6] The two human creatures known only as "man and woman" in the first story take on names and speech in this second narrative. The act of their creation is given a plot and separated into two distinct moments: the creation of a solitary creature from dust (a lonesomeness God calls "not good"[7]), and the subsequent creation of a second creature from bone. God does not speak these creatures into being from afar but shapes them (יצר/*yṣer*) with hands and mud and breath.[8] The creatures were naked, the text tells us, but they were not ashamed—a moment of exposition that hints at ominous things to come.

The second story takes us beyond good beginnings: Eve encounters a talking snake in the garden who persuades her to eat, then share with Adam, a fruit God has forbidden—a fruit that will enable knowledge of good and evil. Once they eat this fruit, they know shame, and they hide from God. This story ends not with a declaration of the goodness of creation, but with a list of curses God heaps upon these creatures and upon the snake. Here we find not the sanctification of rest, but

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[3] Transliteration here and throughout this chapter is according to the transliteration guide provided by the Society for Biblical Literature.
[4] Genesis 1:3
[5] Genesis 1:31
[6] Genesis 3:8
[7] Genesis 2:18
[8] Genesis 2:7, 19.

a list of curses promising work, pain, and exile as the conditions of life on earth. And there was good, and there was evil, the first days.

The question of why we have not one but two creation stories at the beginning of Genesis has puzzled the text's interpreters for centuries. Why are these two variant narratives juxtaposed together at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible? What is the nature of their relationship to one another? Do they stand in basic unity—the second recapitulating the work of the first? Or do they wrestle on the page as rivals for the tradition's blessing?[9] Are they the creation of two distinct cultures, two distinct climates, under the influence of two distinct religious traditions with their own corresponding lore of the earth's creation? Or does the second story simply expand the work of the first in the direction of human creatures? Why do we begin both the world and the canon with this twice-told tale, and what are we to make of this double narrative of creation?

One of the ties that binds these variant origin stories together is the idea that creation is a drama of separation: light from darkness, waters above from waters below, male from female, heaven from earth, land from sea, good from evil. Some scholars have even argued that the term frequently translated as "create" in the first narrative (ברא/*bārā*) would be better translated as "separate," making the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning God *separated* the heavens and the earth."[10] In this first narrative, separation reflects a divinely appointed order—the separation of waters, the separation of lights to govern days and nights—a separation that is, in each and every instance, declared "good." In the second narrative, separation takes on a darker aspect, tied to transgression, distance, loneliness, and expulsion.

Reflecting on the centrality of separation in these two creation stories, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes, "If the creation of the world signifies something, it is, at least in a negative sense, that the creature is not the creator," that is, the creature exists at a remove, a separation from God. Ricouer continues, "Just as the 'successive' stages, which together make up the unique event of

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[9] I am grateful to my teacher Leslie Brisman for this image of the various voices of the Pentateuch as rival siblings competing "for authority, originality, or what is sometimes represented as 'blessing'" (Leslie Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* [Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990], xii).

[10] Ellen J. Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraums, 2009), 184-200. Van Wolde uses cognitive linguistics to distinguish the uses of ברא from עשה. She makes a case, based on the uses of the term ברא throughout the Hebrew Bible, that the first term might be also be read as "to separate" (what God does with the heavens and the waters), while the second consistently means "to make" (what God does with human beings). Van Wolde concludes, "The emergent picture of Genesis 1 is that of a story about making and separating, about coming into being and being differentiated, and equally important, that it is a story about the continuation of creation and the continuation of differentiation. Both processes characterize God's work, his making of new phenomena" (Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 200).

Creation as a complete whole are distinguished from one another as so many separations, so too Creation as a whole is placed under the sign of separation, which we can call 'originary,' through which the world exists as a manifold reality."[11]

Though Ricouer is speaking here about the symbolic significance of God's work of separation as creative act, we might also read this meditation in relationship to the two distinct creation narratives juxtaposed at the beginning of Genesis, which also exist "under the sign of separation." The creature is not the creator. We are not like God, and we do not know like God. While this recognition has a tragic aspect in the second narrative —"the loss of proximity to God symbolized by the expulsion from the garden"—we might also read separation along the lines of the first narrative, as the origins of a form of dynamic creativity that bears some relation, at least by analogy, to the creative power of God, who separates waters above from waters below to create and sustain the world in which we live and move and know—a world that exists by way of this separation.[12]

"In the beginning was hermeneutics," Jacques Derrida writes. In the beginning we see what Derrida calls the "original opening of interpretation" by way of the difference and separation of these two creation stories. Here, in the juxtaposition of these two narratives, we find an invitation to participate in the work of creation: to be fruitful, to multiply interpretation and commentary by the blessing of separation—the blessing that Derrida calls "the generous distance between signs."[13]

We see this generous distance spread out from the creation story into the wider narratives of the history of the descendants of Adam and Eve, who would experience their world in the tension between these two origin stories. From the first story, there is a sense of the goodness of the world, and from the second, a recognition of its ambiguity and fragility. The first story of creation ends with blessing, and specifically the blessing of multiplicity and fertility. The second story ends with exile, and the pain and difficulty of childbirth. These twinned themes—the promise of childbirth and the threat of exile and extinction—run throughout the Hebrew Bible, each contesting the finality of the other. Adam and Eve will have children, but one of their sons will murder the other, be forced like his parents to wander the earth away "from the presence of the Lord," even further

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[11] Paul Ricoeur "Thinking Creation," in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 39.
[12] Ricoeur, "Thinking Creation," 39.
[13] Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book," *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 67, 71. Derrida writes, "The caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption—between letters, words, sentences, books—no signification could be awakened."

east of Eden. The generations of Adam and Eve will multiply, but then they will be led into slavery. They will be freed from slavery only to wander in the wilderness. They will found a prosperous kingdom in the land of promise, then years later, they will be overcome by foreign powers and led into exile once more. The people of God remember themselves like they remember creation: on the one hand there is the record of genealogies and generations (what are often called the *toledot* formulas), on the other, there is the ongoing command to remember: *you were slaves, wanderers, exiles.*[14]

Admitting the existence of two distinct creation narratives appears to be the exception to the rule of literary readings of the Bible that otherwise aim at unity and coherence. While Richard Moulton relegates three of the four gospel narratives in his literary Bible to an appendix in order to compartmentalize the literary materials of his own text from questions proper to historical inquiry, he retains the two creation narratives side-by-side. Moulton does not, however, offer aids to his readers that might help them understand the literary meaning of this juxtaposition, nor does he allow the significance of this early twice-told tale to inform his sense of other textual parallels. The only comment Moulton makes about the relationship between these two creation narratives is in an explanatory aside in the appendix. He writes, "whatever other reasons there may be for a double account of the Creation, the second account clearly connects itself from the very beginning with the Temptation in the Garden."[15] One must assume that these "other reasons"—other ways to think about the juxtaposition of these two distinct ways of narrating the creation of the world—fall out of Moulton's sense of the purview of literary interpretation and the primary task of literary reading: "grasping clearly a literary work as a single whole."[16] It is the aim of this chapter to contest this claim, and to supply "other reasons"—literary reasons—for the Bible's inclusion of so many twice-told tales.

III. Revelation

In his classic *Anatomy of Criticism,* Northrop Frye offers readers an account of the type of reading suitable to the Bible's literary form:

> A purely literary criticism would see the Bible, not as the scrapbook of corruptions, glosses, redactions, insertions, conflations, misplacings, and misunderstandings revealed by the

[14] Exodus 13:3; Deuteronomy 5:15, 6:12, 8:2, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 24:22, 25:17, 26:5; Nehemiah 1:8.
[15] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible,* 1543-1544.
[16] Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible*, 1718.

> analytic critic, but as a typological unity…We cannot trace the Bible back, even historically, to a time when its materials were not being shaped into a typological unity, and if the Bible is to be regarded as inspired in any sense, sacred or secular, its editorial and redacting processes must be regarded as inspired too.[17]

Misunderstandings or internal textual conflicts, in other words, are the product of modern analytic thought, sprung free of the discipline of careful attention to the literary composition of this text, and more specifically, to the text's "inspired" editorial processes which appear, at least on Frye's account, to have coherence and unity as their central aim.[18]

Frye's descriptive "anatomy" of the Bible as a text driven toward typological unity may be a persuasive reading of the history of the Bible's interpretation, but it is an ill fit for the text itself. As I have argued, a good amount of the Bible's narrative traditions do not demonstrate an editorial push toward unity—typological or otherwise—but instead reflect a decision to maintain conflicting perspectives and divergent voices alongside one another. This is true of the story of creation, as seen above, it is true of the double narration of the royal history in Kings and Samuel and then again in Chronicles, and it is true of the four lives of Jesus found juxtaposed at the beginning of the New Testament. If readers like Frye wish to consider the redaction of biblical texts in some way inspired, they would do well to attend to the frictions and fissures this canon decidedly preserves rather than maintaining an unyielding commitment to a vague ideal of its all-encompassing unity.

We find this kind of unresolved tension between frictive voices featured prominently in two of the Bible's exemplary accounts of the nature of revelation: first, in Exodus' cacophonous narration of the theophany at Sinai and second, in the gospel writers' conflicted depiction of Jesus' resurrection. We might expect the narration of these prime revelatory moments in each testament and tradition—the giving of the Torah in Judaism and the resurrection of the Son of God in Christianity—to set out what happened in lucid terms, in order to clearly establish that founding event and ensure its ongoing significance in the life of each religious community. What we find, however, is the preservation of variant narrative traditions that contest and challenge one another's testimony about what was seen and heard and witnessed in this event of revelation.

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[17] Northrop Frye, "Rhetorical Criticism: Theory of Genres," *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 315. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman write, in their Introduction to *The Complete Literary Guide of the Bible:* "Frye's claim for unity is axiomatic for anyone claiming to take a literary approach to the Bible" (Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, "Introduction," to *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 19).

[18] Oddly enough, Frye did not reject the documentary hypothesis, and even names certain source texts in *The Anatomy of Criticism,* identifying the first creation story, for example, as a product of the "P" tradition (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* 294).

First, there is the conflicted and at times bewildering narration of the giving of the law at Sinai in the book of Exodus—a narration that raises more questions than it answers about the nature of revelation. "The details and order of the narrative in chapters 19 and 20 are perplexing," Moshe Greenberg writes, "weighty matters crowd together in a barely intelligible sequence."[19] Did God's revelation come in human speech, or was it loud musical sounds, or booms of thunder? Did the people of Israel hear this revelation, or did they see it? Was the revelation given to Moses and then later transmitted or translated to the people, or did they witness this revelation directly from the foot of the mountain?

Biblical scholar Benjamin Sommer argues that Exodus' conflicted account of God's revelation at Sinai reflects a tension between multiple narrative traditions and multiple ways of understanding the nature of revelation.[20] But rather than reading the visible seams between disparate traditions simply as fodder for historical or text critical study, Sommer sees these conflicts as a way to connect the religious thought of modern Judaism to that of ancient Judaism, seeing debates among contemporary Jewish thinkers between a "stenographic" theory of revelation (in which God dictates all the words of the Pentateuch to Moses who writes them down *exactly* as he heard them) and a "participatory" theory of revelation (in which humans are given active interpretive agency) as having their origins in conflicts internal to the narrative witness of the revelation at Sinai itself.[21]

"Exodus 19 is full of ambiguities, gaps, strange repetitions, and apparent contradictions," Sommer writes, and "these oddities multiply when one reads the two subsequent narratives that treat theophany at Sinai: Exodus 20:18-22 and Exodus 24."[22] There is the matter of Moses' constant movement as he ascends and descends the mountain again and again, and the fact that Moses appears to be at the bottom of the mountain (rather than the top) when God at last gives the commandments.[23] Or there is the matter of God's movements, who appears to be both already on the mountain (19:3) and then about to come to the mountain (19:11), and then appears to descend

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[19] Moshe Greenberg, "Book of Exodus," *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol 6., ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 616.

[20] Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[21] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 1-2.

[22] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 32.

[23] Mark Zvi Brettler writes that this is "quite literally a dizzying chapter, most especially for those who are afraid of heights or don't like hiking up and down mountains repeatedly: Moses is commanded to descend in verses 21 and 24, and commanded to ascend in verse 24, and possibly verse 9; he ascends the mountain in verses 3 and 20, and descends in verses 14 and 25." Brettler later writes, "One thing is obvious about Exod 19: in its redacted form, it is a mess, telling a very confusing, ambiguous story" (Mark Zvi Brettler, "The Many Faces of God in Exodus 19," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures,* 353-368, 354, 366).

again twice before the people once they have gathered at the bottom (19:18, 19:20). There is the declaration God makes elsewhere that "man may not see me and live" (33:20) and its apparent contradiction by God's instruction to Moses in this passage to assemble the congregation in the proper place so that "on the third day the Lord will descend in the *sight* of all the people on Mount Sinai" (19:11).[24]

There are also the variant uses of the term קול that lend further confusion to this event. Most standard English translationsrender קול as "voice" when God speaks to Moses (19:19), as "sound" or "noise" when it is said to come from a horn (20:18), and as "thunder," when it describes the people witnessing it together with lightning (20:18), in order to accommodate its shifting sense registers in this passage.[25] But the fact that the same Hebrew word is used in all three places raises substantive interpretive questions about the nature of God's revelatory act: does Moses hear the voice of the Lord in human language or is it instead a loud sound which he subsequently interprets and translates into speech? And if it is a sound, do the people of God truly *see* that sound, as Exodus 20:18 describes (וכל–העם ריאם את–הקולת), or are they seeing lightning, and hearing its accompanying, revelatory thunder?

And who is the addressee of God's speech in Exodus 20:1, as God begins to deliver the ten commandments? Every other time that the Hebrew Bible narrates God speaking (using the verb דבר/*dbr* or אמר/*amr*), it is immediately followed by the word אל or the particle –ל in order to tell us whom God is speaking to. Here the clue to God's addressee is notably missing.[26] Was God speaking to Moses, who would later give these words to the people (as Exodus 24:3 suggests), or was this a more public event (as certain passages in Exodus 19 and 20 might imply)? Was God speaking to this unidentified audience in sounds—in booms of thunder that would later be translated by Moses or by the congregation of Israel? Or was this human speech, human language, written down by those who witnessed it exactly as it was heard?[27]

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[24] See also Steven D. Fraade, "Hearing and Seeing at Sinai: Interpretive Trajectories," *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity,* ed. George J. Brooke, Hindy Najman and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 247-268.

[25] These translations include the New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, the King James Bible, and the New American Standard Bible.

[26] Sommer writes, "In every occurrence other than Exodus 20:1, the text uses the word אל or the particle –ל to tell us explicitly whom God addressed…Only in the verse introducing the Decalogue in Exodus is there any doubt about the recipient of divine speech…The unprecedented phrasing calls us to wrestle with the question, from whom did Israel receive the text of the Decalogue?" (Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 38).

[27] Sommer adds, "Our understanding of revelation's nature and its very content changes drastically based on which understanding we adopt. If *qol* is a voice, the Israelites heard God providing specific information to Moses. If it is

The apparent contradictions that animate the narration of God's revelation at Sinai highlight the confounding nature of this event. "Because the revelation was so overwhelming," Sommer writes, "the way people perceived it as it was happening must have varied; different Israelites noticed, and missed, different aspects of what took place."[28] But the fact that this event was perceived and interpreted in different ways by different witnesses should not be taken as a sign of scribal or editorial error, nor should it be understood as a threat to the integrity of this text.[29] Rather, Sommer argues that this literary device tells us something about human perception and, at the same time, something about the tremendous object of this particular interpretive activity: the redactor's inclusion of a plurality of voices and descriptions that try to make sense of this event "may be God's intentional strategy of overcoming the limits of human perception."[30] The friction, in other words, is by design. It is, as John Calvin once wrote, God's way of speaking in a stammer in order to "accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity."[31]

Rather than settling an argument about the nature of revelation for posterity and electing to present the event in clear terms of *either* speech or sound, as a revelation to the whole of Israel or to Moses who will then act as a mediator or interpreter; the editors of the book of Exodus preserve each of these possibilities, side by side. Sommer writes,

> Exodus does not want the audience to know whether the lawgiving was direct, mediated or a mix of the two. The book does, however, encourage the audience to wonder about this issue, to think through various possibilities, to see their strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps to think about their implications. Exodus endorses a question, but not an answer; a debate, not a resolution.[32]

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thunder, then what occurred at Sinai was an overwhelming experience, but not necessarily one in which Israelites acquired direct teaching from God. The stenographic theory of revelation grows out of the former translation; participatory theories can align themselves with the latter" (Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 37).

[28] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 45.

[29] Moshe Greenberg writes, "The extraordinary complexity is best explained as a result of parallel narrations; the author appears to have been reluctant to exclude any scrap of data relevant to this momentous occasion" (Moshe Greenberg and S. David Sperling, "Book of Exodus," *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol 6., ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum [Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007], 616).

[30] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 45.

[31] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.1, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 121. Calvin writes something quite similar in his commentary on Genesis: when God descends to us, he, in a certain sense, abases himself and stammers with us, so he allows us to stammer with him. And this is to be truly wise, when we embrace God in the manner in which he accommodates himself to our capacity" (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* Vol. 2, trans. John King [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850], 238).

[32] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 41.

The text does not settle the debate that persists in the present between conflicting ways of thinking about the nature of revelation: it does not clearly affirm the role of human interpretive agency (in the mediating work of Moses or in the translating work of all those who heard words in sound), but nor does it preclude the possibility of human participation in the event of revelation. Instead, it actively maintains the tension between various ways of seeing and interpreting this theophany, and therefore various ways of understanding the nature of God's revelation and the role of the human interpreter.

In this way, Sommer argues that the work of higher critical scholarship may provide an aid to modern theological reflection. By drawing attention to the internal conflicts within biblical narration, higher criticism "resurrects forgotten voices of religious creativity from ancient Israel," in such a way that these voices might sanction ongoing exegetical debate and interpretive creativity in the present.[33] In a kindred essay, Sommer writes, "a source critical approach to ancient texts can be a deeply respectful interpretive tool to help us understand the documents passed down to us as scripture, for they allow us to hear more precisely and hence more sympathetically the voices of our earliest co-religionists."[34] Well-intentioned attempts to present the text as a unity risk obscuring or suppressing these voices, and thus forfeiting the benefits of whatever "other reasons" the editors of this text may have had for preserving the tension between these narrative voices. Sommer writes, "exegetes who attempt to bring that dialectic to closure or to find unity within a canonical form of a text may often work against the biblical redactors."[35]

Sommer provides a compelling model of a form of theological reflection that attends to the conflicts between biblical narrators as significant and instructive elements of the scriptural tradition. It is worth noting, however, that Sommer did not think this model would be appealing to Protestant readers. "Protestant Christianity has often assumed that the Bible speaks as a unity," Sommer writes, "from a Protestant point of view, when one crosses the boundary of the canon, one moves into a different, lesser, realm, and therefore what is within the boundary must have a conceptual integrity

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[33] Daniel Boyarin makes a similar argument about the potential for midrash to resurrect lost voices of the tradition. Boyarin writes that the dialectic of midrash is "a representation of the inner ambiguity and dialogue of the biblical text itself" that aims not to solve textual ambiguity, but to draw it out and consider "the possibilities for making meaning out of it" (Daniel Boyarin, "Inner Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality, and the Dialectic of Midrash: The Waters of Marsh," *Prooftexts* 10 [1990]: 29-49, 29.

[34] Benjamin D. Sommer, "The Source Critic and the Religious Interpreter," *Interpretation* 60 (2006): 9-20, 9.

[35] Sommer, *Dialogical Biblical Theology,* 51. Sommer writes, "P, or J, or Dtr_1 have just as much right to participate in this conversation as do the redactors or canonizers. In stressing the need to examine discrete texts, I am not necessarily proposing to undo the work of the redactors. After all, in a great many cases these redactors knowingly put together documents full of tension without doing much to dampen our perceptions of these tensions. They might very well be pleased to know that contemporary scholars revel in the dialect they devised."

or singularity."[36] In contrast to rabbinic forms of Judaism, or to Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism does not have an authoritative extra-scriptural tradition on which to ground their interpretations, beliefs and practices. "Undermining scripture in a community in which *sola scriptura* is a byword leaves the religious believer dangerously adrift," Sommer writes; and indeed, the last century of fractures within the Protestant community over the status of scripture and the shibboleth of its "inerrancy" testify to the truth of this judgment.[37]

But as Protestant theologian David Kelsey writes, "ascribing 'wholeness' to the canon is not identical with ascribing 'unity' to the canon."[38] A strong commitment to *sola scriptura,* or the sufficiency of the Bible's textual witness, need not bind the community to a narrow understanding of the Bible's literary "unity" or coherence. Instead, faithfulness to the old Protestant adage *Scriptura Scripturae interpres* ("scripture is the interpreter of scripture") might yield a form of reading that attends to the frictive patterns of biblical narration and the internal conflicts and conflicting perspectives that this text preserves. Here, the literary form of scripture can invite a practice of 'holistic' reading built not on a preexistent or predetermined sense of textual unity, but, as in the example of Sinai, on the reader's interpretive capacity to relate disparate perspectives to one another.

Within the Christian tradition, this invitation may appear most perceptibly in the hermeneutic friction between the gospels' divergent witnesses to the event of Jesus' resurrection. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each offer a different picture of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, a different account of who came to visit the tomb, when they got there, what they saw once they arrived, and what they did after they left—whether they told anyone or not, who believed them, and what those believers did next.[39] There are appearance traditions (in which Jesus appears to his disciples in bodily form) and even a disappearance tradition (in which Jesus' resurrection is known

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[36] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 230.

[37] Sommer, *Revelation and Authority,* 22. Over the last century, in the wake of higher critical scholarship, the territory of American Protestantism has been marked out and divided by debates about the Bible. These borders have not been drawn in the style of previous centuries, when battle lines were construed according to divergent interpretations of one passage or another. Instead, faith communities and academic institutions alike have been split according to dogmatic beliefs about the nature of the text itself: what the Bible is (or more emphatically, is not). Terms like "inerrancy" have become a kind of *shibboleth*: a virtual stand-in for a wider set of doctrinal commitments and a key identity marker for or against membership in particular subsets of the Protestant community. While some find these debates stale and outdated, those who would identify as "inerrantists" continue to see this issue as a central measure of Christian orthodoxy. These doctrinal feuds have now hardened into a firmly settled dogmatic insistence on both sides, sprung free of its relationship to the questions that provoked these controversies in the first place, thereby discouraging (or even precluding) the ongoing interpretive labors otherwise galvanized by difficult texts.

[38] David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, [1975], 1999), 106.

[39] Christopher Bryan, *The Resurrection of the Messiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Michael Licona, *Why are there Differences Between the Gospels?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

by way of his body's absence).[40] Each of the gospels report different numbers and names of the women who came to visit Jesus' tomb only to find it empty.[41] There are also variants in the gospels' identification of the messenger figure who first interprets the meaning of the empty tomb to those who have found it without a body. Is the messenger a young man (as in Mark), two men (as in Luke), an angel (as in Matthew), or two angels (as in John)?[42]

In each of the synoptic gospels, the news of Jesus' resurrection (like the theophany at Sinai) is met with different shades of fear and confusion. In Mark's gospel, the messenger tells the women not to be astonished (Μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε/*Mē ekthambeisthe*), but the women are alarmed, and they flee from the tomb in terror and tell no one.[43] In Matthew's gospel, the angel tells the women "Do not be afraid" (Μὴ φοβεῖσθε ὑμεῖς/*Mē phobeisthe hymeis*) and though the women leave the tomb in both fear and joy, they do as the messengers have asked and report the news to the other disciples.[44] In Luke's gospel, the first response to news of the resurrection (or to the appearance of the risen Jesus) is terror; but Luke's messengers and Luke's Jesus respond not with a prohibition against such terror, but with instructive rhetorical questions: *"Why are you frightened?"* or *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"*[45]

The questions that these divergent narratives raise about what actually happened in the days following Jesus' crucifixion as his disciples began to speak about the possibility that he had been raised from the dead have presented what some call the "prize puzzle of New Testament research"—prized for its interpretive difficulty, its ongoing scholarly controversy and the centrality of this claim to the structure of Christian belief.[46] Theologian Rowan Williams writes, "as far as the historical question goes, it is clear that the scholarly analysis of the resurrection narratives has not

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[40] The only canonical example we have of a disappearance tradition is the original ending of the gospel of Mark, in which a young man tells the women who have come to visit the tomb that the Lord has been raised and is gone (causing the women to flee in terror). The additional endings of Mark add appearances of Jesus to both Mary Magdalene and the disciples.

[41] In Mark's narrative, three women visit the tomb: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. In Matthew's text, there are only two: Mary Magdalene and someone the text identifies as "the mother of the sons of Zebedee." In Luke's there are more than four women who see the tomb (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, along with unnamed "others"). In John's narrative, it is only Mary Magdalene.

[42] In a recent study, Michael Licona makes a persuasive case that the variances in the gospel accounts may be attributable to the way that Greek authors learned to both imitate and improvise source texts during their training through the *progymnasmata* (Michael Licona, *Why Are There Differences Between the Gospels?* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016]).

[43] Mark 16:6.

[44] Matthew 28:8.

[45] Luke 24:38, 5.

[46] Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 200.

yielded a single and compelling resolution to the numerous difficulties that these texts pose."[47] But Williams argues that these ongoing debates do not stem from some modern critical turn but originate in the text itself. Like Sommer's claim regarding the connection between modern Jewish debates about the nature of revelation and conflicts preserved within the textual tradition, Williams argues: "the indeterminacy of scholarly analysis may be interwoven with the indeterminacy of the various narratives themselves."[48]

For Williams, this indeterminacy is an important literary feature of these stories, and not just a problem for literary readers or theologians to overcome in order to get to the real substance of the historical resurrection. These "painfully untidy stories" do not provide readers with a single, stable image of the resurrection, but instead offer "the image of an absence, an image of the failure of images." This failure, in turn, "confirms the reality of a creative liberty, an agency not sealed and closed, but still obstinately engaged with a material environment and a historical process."[49] Here, the gospels work much like Sommer's estimation of the Sinai tradition to preserve a form of interpretive agency for the texts' readers in relationship to this event—maintaining its truth alongside a certain irreducible interpretive indeterminacy that preserves the nature of the resurrection as an ongoing hermeneutic question.

Both the revelation at Sinai and the resurrection of Jesus are preserved in the textual tradition with significant internal hermeneutic frictions as to what was seen (or heard), who saw (or heard) it, who interpreted it, and how it was interpreted. What each of these internally conflicted narrative traditions hold in common, however, is their testimony to the fact that those who witnessed these revelatory events were terrified and confused. The women who see the young man at the tomb in Mark's gospel flee and tell no one "for they were afraid," in Matthew the guards who see the angelic messenger fall to the ground in fear ("like dead men," the narrator tells us); the trembling people who have just witnessed the קול of the Lord from the base of Mt. Sinai beg Moses to stand in and mediate between them and God: "do not let God speak to us," they plead, "lest we die."[50] The sense that these two events overwhelmed all those who witnessed them is preserved in the form of their narration, drawing attention to the frailties of the human perceivers who tried to

[47] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 183
[48] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 195.
[49] Williams, *On Christian Theology,* 195-6.
[50] Mark 16:8, Matthew 28:4, Exodus 20:19.

interpret what they saw and heard, while transcending the limits of any given perceiver by preserving the tension between variant views.

The Biblical text preserves the memory of the creation of humanity, of the revelation of God at Sinai, and the revelation of the son of God in his resurrected body in the form of frictive discourse, maintaining a tension between multiple narratives and multiple interpretations. Contrary to the impression given by either Moulton or Frei, the aim of these texts' editors does not appear to be a simple form of literary unity, but rather a dynamic relation between different portraits. This relation bears a certain resemblance to what the film theorist Sergei Einstein once called the "montage principle." Eisenstein writes,

> The juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot—as it does a *creation*. It resembles a creation—rather than the sum of its parts—from the circumstances that in every juxtaposition the result is qualitatively distinguishable from each component element viewed separately.[51]

Eisenstein adds, "It is precisely the montage principle, as distinguished from that of representation, which obligates spectators themselves to create."[52] The nature of the relation between juxtaposed images, in other words, remains open to the creative interpretation or specification of the reader.[53] In this way, "the juxtaposition gives room," as Larry Bouchard writes—it makes space for readers in that generous and hospitable distance that is the byproduct of hermeneutic friction.[54]

There are of course disparate material conditions behind the hermeneutic friction preserved in these texts: disparate ways we might account for the preservation of conflicting narrative traditions in the gospel narratives, or in the Hebrew Bible. The preservation of narrative variants in the gospels may well be a product of the way that the writers of the time learned to amplify, adapt and expand their source materials, while variants in the Hebrew Bible may be a product of oral tradition or post-exilic historical revision. My intention in drawing together examples from different

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[51] Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense,* trans. Jay Ledya (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947), 7. I am indebted to Robert Alter for directing me to Eisenstein's work through his engagement with Eisenstein in *The Art of Biblical Narrative.*
[52] Eisenstein, 35.
[53] Frank Kermode makes a point along similar lines in his discussion of the parables. Kermode writes that all parables "require some interpretative action from the auditor; they call for completion; the parable-event isn't over until a satisfactory answer or explanation is given; the interpretation completes it. In this respect it is like a riddle…" (Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979], 24).
[54] Larry D. Bouchard, "Religion and Literature: Four Theses and More," *Religion & Literature* 41 (2009): 12-19, 18-19.

bodies of biblical literature is not to flatten these disparate textual traditions nor to obviate the work of historical studies. Instead, I want to draw attention to a literary trope that joins together various parts of the canon, and to argue that the hermeneutic frictions common to each of these texts might provide the starting place for a new kind of literary reading, and a new form of theological reflection on the form and structure of biblical narrative.

If Northrop Frye is at least partially right, if there is some organizing impulse within the structure of the canon that works to gather disparate elements into a unity (by virtue of its common binding or its reception by various reading communities in various forms as 'scripture'), there is also an equal and opposite force at play that works to preserve a tension between conflicting ways of remembering a terrifying theophany, or conflicting ways of narrating the beginning of creaturely life on earth. While literary methods of reading have long been utilized for their classificatory capacities, to determine the genre of a biblical text and thus assist in the determination of that text's meaning, they might also open up interpretation by way of a more dynamic account of genre itself, one which sees the interruption and tension occasioned by hermeneutic frictions not as an antagonist to literary reading, but as a goad to further thought.

IV. The Role of Genre in Hermeneutic Activity

Just over twenty years ago, theologian David Tracy wrote: "the influence of literary criticism and literary theory on Christian theologies has become a major factor in any reasonable interpretation or assessment of theology today."[55] While this may not be as true now as it was then, the convergence of these discourses several decades ago in the work of scholars like Hans Frei has left a lasting impact on the field of Christian theology. For this reason, we would do well to heed the warning Tracy extends along with this assessment—a call to those who have inherited this legacy to think critically about the terms of this convergence: to "rethink the relationship of thinking God to naming God" as it is presented by these texts—specifically in terms of the "complex hermeneutical issue of the elusive and intricate relationship between form and content."[56] What ideas from literary

[55] David Tracy, "Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 7 (1994): 302-319, 302.

[56] Tracy, "Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology," 302. While Tracy goes in a different direction with this question, considering the course of modern theology rather than modern biblical exegesis or theological hermeneutics, he comes to a similar conclusion to that which Ricoeur comes to below. Namely: "Modernity is always in danger of squandering the classical heritage of plural and possibly polyphonic forms for naming and thinking God in favor of some singular meaning which however valuable for its limited function is nonetheless too

studies found their way into Christian theology, and how do these ideas about the method of literary interpretation or the nature of literary objects continue to inform theological readings of the Bible?

Over the last century, literary study of the Bible has focused its attention on matters of genre, training readers in a set of competencies that might enable them to recognize the formal conventions of the genres we find in biblical literature and by way of the recognition of these forms, offer better interpretations of the content of these texts.[57] While scholars debated which texts could be classified into which genres, and whether the boundaries between biblical poetry and biblical prose were really as firm as some made them out to be,[58] most generally agreed that gaining competence in the genre categories of the ancient world (as best we could understand them) would help us understand these texts "on their own terms."

This account of the role of genre in the process of reading and interpretation resembles what biblical scholar David M. Gunn once called "reading for closure—reading that is, for the right meaning." Gunn explains: "meaning, on this view, is located in the text, which is to say that meaning is essentially a matter of reading competence…inculcuate competence (by learning the 'poetics')…and you will take the 'point of it all'; in short, you will read the Bible right."[59] While Gunn is speaking here of the work of Meir Sternberg, his comments might easily be directed toward Richard Moulton or Hans Frei. The notion of genre as an interpretive key stands as the animating force and the organizing principle behind the creation of Moulton's literary Bible. It also provides the central conceit of Frei's theological meditation on the gospel as realistic narrative. However, while learning the conventions of a certain mode of literary discourse may prove a useful aid in the work of interpretation, there are other ways to frame the role that genre plays in hermeneutic

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narrow in its naming and too confined in its thinking to allow the full range of premodern forms to find a postcritical life of second naivete for the once confident, now troubled modern thinker" (Tracy, 309)

[57] The turn to Biblical genres has a longer legacy within biblical studies, tied to Hermann Gunkel's work on what came to be known as "form criticism." See Herman Gunkel, *Genesis,* trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer Library of Biblical Studies, 1997); *An Introduction to the Psalms,* trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer Library of Biblical Studies, 1998).

[58] See James Kugel's discussion of the fuzzy genre boundaries between biblical poetry and biblical prose in James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 59-95.

[59] David M. Gunn, "Reading Right: Reliable and Omniscient Narrator Omniscient God, and Foolproof Composition in the Hebrew Bible," *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield,* ed. David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) 53-64, 53. Gunn writes elsewhere: This is all very acceptable if we are fundamentalist readers. If, however, we are inclined to take the narrative's play with ambiguity and complexity as more than a kind of window dressing, we will expect the possibility of multiple and conflicting 'competent' readings" (Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 193-211, 194).

activity—ways that may prove helpful for attempts to understand the friction between biblical narrators in distinctly literary terms.

Gerhart and the Dynamics of Genre

In her book *Genre Choices, Gender Questions*, literary theorist Mary Gerhart argues that even as genre has come to replace authorial intention as the key to understanding literary texts, our understanding of genre has a long "history of misreading."[60] Our concept of genre, like that of gender, has often been understood as a set of empty labels "waiting to be filled by specific texts," or temporally, as a single classificatory moment that occurs in the initial stages of interpretive engagement.[61] Gerhart argues that genre should be seen as a more dynamic process that takes place in the relationship between texts and their readers as expectations are continually formed, challenged, and reformed. While generic frameworks are useful hypotheses in the initial stages of interpretation, providing "the means by which a reader is able to handle the task of making a 'whole' of the parts of a text and to relate the formal aspects of one text to another,"[62] these hypotheses later "quietly subvert the worlds of meaning that produce them," forcing readers to see beyond their initial assumptions toward a deeper recognition of what lies before them.[63]

On this account, initial readerly expectations (misoriented though they may be) are a *necessary* part of the interpretive process of reading texts. They are the misunderstandings that set the hermeneutic process in motion.[64] These early genre choices supply the conditions by which a reader can later be "pulled up short" by a text as they recognize that the concepts and frameworks they initially elected no longer match the text before them and are therefore insufficient to the interpretive task at hand. They allow readers to move, in Immanuel Kant's terms, from determinative judgments (in which we fit the particular in front of us into our prior conceptual categories) to reflecting judgments, which compel us to search for as-yet-unknown concepts in order

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[60] Mary Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 3.
[61] Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions,* 13.
[62] Gerhart, 25.
[63] Gerhart, 15
[64] In the manuscripts to his later hermeneutic project, Friedrich Schleiermacher makes an observation along similar lines when he writes that "every error is productive." But he would go on in the published version of *Hermeneutics and Criticism* to claim both that hermeneutics should never come to an end, and that the goal of all hermeneutic endeavor should be "to avoid misunderstanding at every point"—appearing to eliminate one of the active engines of the process he previously identified (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts,* ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman [Missoula: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977], 69; *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings,* trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 29).

to name something that does not fit our first attempts at categorization.[65] In this way, genres are or have the potential to be "principles of production" for both authors and readers.[66] Misunderstanding, or a "misfit" between prior interpretations and what lies on the page before us, becomes on these terms an occasion to go "further up, further in"—both in our interpretation of a single character or event, as well as in our sense of the whole.

To flesh out Gerhart's point, we might consider a puzzling narrative parallel in the gospels. This parallel (which is notably absent from Luke's gospel) does not present Jesus' identity in the "cumulative, unbroken" sequence Frei identifies in his reading of Luke as the unified pattern of all gospel narrative. Instead, by using generic conventions to draw attention to breaks or ruptures in previously established narrative patterns, a parallel between an early and a late pericope found in both Mark's and Matthew's gospel raises more questions than it answers about the identity of Jesus, making room in the space between these narratives for various ways of thinking about the humanity of Jesus and his own self-understanding.

Both Mark and Matthew describe an episode early in Jesus' time with the disciples when he goes out with them on a boat during a mighty storm. The storm was "so great," Matthew reports, "that the boat was being swamped by the waves."[67] The disciples are awake and afraid, but Mark tells us that Jesus "was in the stern, asleep on a cushion."[68] They go down and wake Jesus up. In Matthew's version, the disciples shout "Lord save us! We are perishing!" while in Mark's account, the disciples appear less angry than confused (as they often are in Mark's gospel), asking him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus gets up, rebukes the storm, and turns back to his disciples. "Why are you afraid?" he asks in both accounts, blaming their unfounded fear on their lack of faith.[69]

Toward the end of these two gospels, we arrive at a similar scene. Late on another night, Jesus and the disciples come to a garden. Jesus is agitated and distressed—"even to death" he tells them, and asks his disciples to stay awake.[70] He goes away from them and prays, pleading that the cup or the hour might pass, that he might not do what he fears he must. Rising up from his prayer,

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[65] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[66] Gerhart, "Generic Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 43 (1988): 29-44, 34.
[67] Matthew 8:24, closely paralleled by Mark 4:37
[68] Mark 4:38
[69] Matthew 8:26, Mark 4:40
[70] Matthew 26:38, Mark 14:34

he returns to his disciples, who he finds asleep. He turns to Peter, asking, in Mark's words, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?"[71] This cycle repeats three times (foreshadowing, perhaps, Peter's later repeated denial of his affiliation with Jesus), and at last Jesus returns the third time to find them sleeping ("for their eyes were heavy," Matthew reports), and they do not know what to tell him.[72] Jesus asks them, in Mark's words, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough; the hour has come."[73]

What is the relationship between these two stories? On one reading, the disciples were awake when they should have been sleeping, and sleeping when they should have been awake: they know not what they ought to fear. On another, we might find in the garden an odd reversal of the matter as it was at sea. This time it is the disciples who are sleeping, seemingly unaware of the peril at hand, and it is Jesus who is distressed, and perhaps even frightened or confused. Is there a typological or literary connection between these two moments of narration? How should we read this reversal of those who suffer and those who sleep? Should we see it along predictable lines, focusing on the behavior of the disciples and assuming that the lesson of this text comes from their foolish ignorance (in waking or in sleeping)? Or is this reversal a kind of interpretive *peripeteia,*[74] a dramatic overturning of our own readerly understanding? Are we to read the moral that Jesus offers to his disciples in the first narrative onto the second—is it now Jesus who suffers from little faith? If so, how are we to read the way that Mark and Matthew portray this weakness? Is this evidence that Jesus was indeed "made like us in all things," down to the very wavering of our convictions and resolves?[75] Or is this just another story about the wavering convictions of the disciples, who lacked the eyes to see distress in its true form?

Here, we encounter expectations that were formed in the initial stages of reading—expectations about what it looks like to have little faith—that, some chapters later, seem an ill or surprising fit once Jesus takes on the role established and honed by the disciples. But it is these very expectations, the genre hypotheses we form early in our reading, that allow us to be pulled up short by the story of Jesus in the garden. Genres not only make patterns but also "make room," in Gerhart's words, for "what can be thought"[76]

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[71] Mark 14:37
[72] Matthew 26:43
[73] Mark 14:41
[74] The Greek word "peripeteia" refers to a sudden reversal—a change in circumstances, fates or fortunes.
[75] Hebrews 2:17 NRSV
[76] Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions,* 5.

Of course, notwithstanding the carefully restricted scope of this dissertation, narratives are not the only genre we find in biblical literature. The Bible's varied and interwoven literary genres (like the varied and interwoven perspectives of its narrators) may provide another way for us to consider the role of both genre and hermeneutic friction in biblical interpretation, and moreover, in the work of theological reflection.

Ricoeur on Genre in Theological Exegesis

In an essay originally published in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur considers what the structures of biblical narration teach us about the hermeneutic work of "Naming God."[77] Ricoeur argues that the diverse and interwoven literary genres we find in the Bible reveal something important about the Bible's mode of theological speech—something that ought to serve as a subsequent guide for our own theological reflection. He writes,

> The naming of God, in the originary expressions of faith, is not simple, but multiple. It is not a single tone, but polyphonic. The originary expressions of faith are complex forms of discourse as diverse as narratives, prophecies, laws, proverbs, prayers, hymns, liturgical formulas, and wisdom writings. As a whole these discourses name God, but they do so in various ways.[78]

Like Frei, Ricoeur claims that the form of biblical literature ought to play a strong role in theological reflection about its content; as Ricoeuer writes elsewhere, "the literary genres of the Bible do not constitute a rhetorical façade which it would be possible to pull down in order to reveal some thought content that is indifferent to its literary vehicle."[79] But Ricoeur moves beyond Frei's selective attention to a single genre of biblical literature (the "realistic narrative" of the synoptic gospels), recommending instead a concern for the plurality of literary genres that comprise the biblical canon.[80] These genres name God in different ways: "in narration that recounts his acts, prophecy that speaks in the divine name, prescription that designates God as the source of the imperative, wisdom that seeks God as the meaning of meaning, and the hymn that invokes God in

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[77] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 215-227, 220.
[78] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 220.
[79] Ricoeur, "Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 90-91
[80] Ricoeur writes, "We miss what is unique about biblical faith if we take categories such as narrative, oracle, commandment, and so on, as rhetorical devices that are alien to the content they transmit. What is admirable, on the contrary, is that structure and kerygma accommodate each other in each form of narration. It is within this mutual accommodation of the form and the confession of faith that the naming of God diversifies itself" (Ricoeur, "Naming God," 220).

the second person."[81] For this reason, Ricoeur argues that any exposition of the theological significance of the Bible's literary form should include attention to the diverse genres represented in the canon: "not just in an enumeration that would juxtapose them, but in a living dialectic that will display their interferences with one another."[82]

This dialectic that Ricoeur describes in the interferences between biblical genres has a sharp analogue in the world of physics that provides a salient illustration of both Ricoeur's meditation and our wider discussion of hermeneutic frictions. When two waves of light, sound, or matter superimpose on one another, they create an *interference pattern* in the meeting of their crests and troughs.[83] When the crests and troughs of these two meeting waves are out of sync—one ascending as the other is descending—this creates *destructive interference,* in which the force of each wave is dampened in relationship to the other. When the crests and troughs of the two meeting waves correspond, however, this creates *constructive interference,* amplifying the force of the meeting waves beyond that of either original. In the same way, the interferences—or "frictions"—between the Bible's diverse literary genres do their own kind of work alongside that of the genres themselves. While these diverse genres offer different ways of naming God, the interferences between these genres and their respective forms of naming draw attention to the insufficiency of any single form of speech to do justice to this particular object, and so pull one another up short, like the destructive forms of interference between opposing waves. Ricoeur writes, "the referent 'God' is not just the index of the mutual belonging together (*appurtenance*) of the originary forms of the discourse of faith. It is also the index of their incompleteness. It is their common goal, which escapes each of them."[84]

At the same time, individual discourses "shrink" when they are isolated from one another—they lack the force yielded by their constructive interference with other ways of narrating and naming God. For this reason the work of "narrative theology," which focuses on a single genre of

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[81] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 222. "Narratives, prophecies, laws, and so on, are not established at the level of the concept but at that of the schema…these schemas are models; that is, rules for producing figures of the divine: models of the monarch, the judge, the father, the husband, the rabbi, the servant...These schemas and models remain very diversified and heterogeneous, and are incapable by themselves of forming a system…yet their propensity is toward anthropomorphic representation, toward becoming an idol. The functioning of the model, therefore, must be set within a dialectic of the Name and the Idol. The Name works on the schema or model by making it move, by making it dynamic, inverting it into an opposed image. (Thus God assumes all the positions in the figures of the family: father, mother, spouse, brother, and finally 'Son of Man') Just as, according to Kant, the Idea requires the surpassing of not only the image but also the concept, in the demand to 'think more,' the Name subverts every model, but only through them" (Ricoeur, "Naming God," 226).

[82] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," 221.

[83] I am indebted to my advisor, Larry Bouchard, who directed me to the fruitful analogue between Ricoeur's account of the "interference" between biblical genres and the phenomenon of interference patterns.

[84] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 222.

biblical literature, represents a prematurely narrowed exegetical task. "No biblical narrative works merely as narrative," Ricoeur writes, "It receives not only its theological but even its original religious meaning from its *composition with other modes of discourse.*"[85] In this way, the diversity of the canonical text yields what Ricoeur calls a "polysemic and polyphonic concept of revelation," that speaks about God in multiple ways from multiple angles.[86] "The referent 'God' is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses," Ricoeur writes, "it expresses the circulation of meaning among all the forms of discourse wherein God is named."[87]

Throughout this dissertation I have spoken not of the interference between literary genres in the biblical canon, but of the hermeneutic friction between the Bible's narrators. That said, Ricoeur's discussion of the confluence of literary genres may prove a fruitful analogue to this discussion in that it provides a different way to consider the generative friction between conflicting ways of looking: a friction that negatively marks both the limitations of any single speech act and, in constructive confluence with others, yields something more than the communicative capacity of any individual view.[88]

V. Biblical Poetry

To see this dialectic function of language in biblical interpretation in another way, we might have recourse to another genre of biblical literature. While this dissertation is largely concerned with the conflicts we find in narrative texts (rather than legal materials, for example),[89] we might benefit from a consideration of the way that non-identical repetition, or the friction between juxtaposed but divergent perspectives, functions within the semantics of biblical poetry.

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[85] Ricoeur, "Toward a Narrative Theology," 245.
[86] Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 92.
[87] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 222. Ricoeur writes elsewhere: "Throughout these discourses, God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as the one to whom one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type, or sometimes as the one whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me" (Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred,* 41).
[88] Ricoeur writes, "Perhaps an exhaustive inquiry, if one were possible, would disclose that all these forms of discourse together constitute a circular system and that the theological content of each one of them receives its signification from the total constellation of forms of discourse. Religious language would then appear as polyphonic language sustained by the circularity of forms" (Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," *Figuring the Sacred,* 41).
[89] For an example of a similar project in the realm of the Bible's legal materials see David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Biblical poetry makes similar plays of language—juxtaposing like with like in adjacent lines to form seeming "couplets" and create what modern critics would later call "semantic parallelism."[90] Because the second line does not precisely repeat the contents of the first, there is an advance of some sort from line to line—a specification, amplification, qualification, reversal, etc.—creating dynamic movement between adjacent lines (what James Kugel once labeled in shorthand as "A is so, and what's more, B").[91] In Psalm 119, for example, we read:

לְעוֹלָם יְהוָה דְּבָרְךָ בַּ שָּׁמָיִם נִצָּב

לְדֹר וָדֹר אֱמוּנָתֶךָ כּוֹנַנְתָּ אֶרֶץ וַתַּעֲמֹד

Forever Lord, your word stands in the heavens.

Your faithfulness endures from generation to generation, you made the earth firm, and it stood.[92]

Here, the Psalmist moves between two different ways of considering the eternal provision or watchfulness of God over the earth. By one view, expressed in the first line, the word of God stands in the heavens above us—the same heavens that that word brought into being. As in the first creation story, the word of God is represented at a distance, creating and sustaining at some remove from creaturely life. By another view, that which we find in the second line, God's strength stands in more intimate relationship to humanity, holding it fast from the ground below. This is the ground God establishes in the second creation narrative before taking up its dust to form the first human creature. The ground both founds the creation of humanity, and sustains with its fruits each successive generation. Here, the relationship of God to human creatures is preserved in a tension between varied ways of construing the terms of that relationship. We might interpret this tension spatially, as varied views of the proximity of God to human life, or temporally: between a God who constantly watches over creation or a God who creates sturdy ground in a single movement, effecting faithfulness in succeeding generations by the ripples of this individual creative act. The lines express different angles of vision, different ways of framing the sustaining work of God that appears to surround creation from all sides. Each way of looking names but does not exhaust God's activity in the world; when combined they mark not only the extent of this activity, but also the

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[90] See James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[91] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry,* 3.

[92] Psalm 119: 89-90. I am guided in my translation of this psalm by Robert Alter (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007], 427).

insufficiency of each of their speech acts to comprehend their object. Indeed, a few lines later, the psalmist writes, "for each finite thing I saw an end / but your command is exceedingly broad."[93]

There is a strain, so to speak, between poetic lines, that preserves a task for thought, maintaining its meaning as a question posed again and again to successive generations of readers: what is the relationship between Line A and Line B? Considering the terms of this relationship individuates the conceit of each of the lines by way of a process of comparison and differentiation and, at the same time, produces something new in the relationship between these juxtaposed conceits. This latter hermeneutic process resembles what Arthur Koestler calls "bisociation"—or the productive combination or two or more frames of thought. In his book, *The Art of Creation,* Koestler argues that this process of combination stands at the ground of human creativity in the humanities, the sciences, and the arts, reminding readers that the Latin word for thinking—*cogito*—derives from the expression "to shake together."[94] This shaking, on Koestler's view, provides the generative conditions for our capacity to break out of old forms of thought and to see something genuinely new in the relationships between previously unconnected planes.

This is perhaps one reason why, when Ricoeur reaches for a hermeneutic idea for the concept of revelation, he has recourse to the language of "poetics"—not as one literary genre among others in the canon, but as the "overall functioning of these genres as the seat of semantic innovation."[95] As Ricoeur writes elsewhere, "One of the functions of imagination is to give a concrete dimension to the suspension or *epoche* proper to split reference."[96] By drawing two different references together in relation, poetic thought introduces the suspension of previously established judgments as the interpreter tries to make out the nature of the relation between the two juxtaposed terms. By preserving unspecified relations between different ways of naming God these texts function poetically to "intend a world, which calls forth on our part a way of dwelling there."[97]

On these terms, hermeneutic friction between adjacent lines of poetry or between juxtaposed but divergent narrative traditions preserve a certain "dialectical labor" that constitutes a curriculum for theological reflection.[98] If the formal structures of these texts, like their laws, wisdom or spiritual teachings "intend a world," as Ricoeur writes, and so invite readers into a particular way

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[93] Psalm 119: 96 (Alter, "The Book of Psalms," 427).
[94] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchitson, 1964), 120.
[95] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 225.
[96] Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, Feeling," 154.
[97] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 226.
[98] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 225.

of dwelling there, frictions appear to invite creative participation in the hermeneutic movement between juxtaposed lines or stories. In this case, the good reader may well be an inventor, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once claimed, whose mind is braced by interpretive labor, but bent toward a form of creative production.[99] The juxtaposition makes room for this reader, and waits.

[99] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Poems,* 51-72, 59.

Chapter Seven | *Conclusion*

I. Bonhoeffer on Creation and Difference

In the early work of theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we find an example of exegetical reflection on the literary and theological significance of the Bible's internal hermeneutic frictions. In a series of lectures given at the University of Berlin between 1932 and 1933, originally titled *Schöpfung und Sünde* (now titled *Creation and Fall*), Bonhoeffer identifies a relationship between the form and content of the two creation stories: between the drama of separation, difference and relation that these two narratives relate, and the frictive form of their composition—separate stories of the same event, placed side-by-side.

In these lectures, Bonhoeffer offered students at the University of Berlin a series of meditations on the relationships between paired objects in the two creation stories: between creation and fall, between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, between Adam and Eve, and also between the two distinct versions of the creation story canonized alongside one another.[1] After describing the terms of the first creation story to his audience in an early lecture, Bonhoeffer goes on to acknowledge its pair: "It was long ago realized that what we have here is a second creation story that is quite different from, and substantially older than, the first," he says, then asks his students, "what are we to make of that?"[2]

Bonhoeffer offers a theological meditation on the differences between these two distinct stories. While these differences caused many of his contemporaries to hold the Bible's witness at least partially under suspicion, Bonhoeffer takes a different view of the incongruities between these two texts.[3] He writes, "When one first looks at both creation stories together, it is plain that the first and the second accounts are only representations of the same thing from two different sides; indeed it must even be said that the first without the second, like the second without the first, would not

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[1] Published as *Schöpfung und Fall. Theologishe Auslegung von Genesis 103* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1933)—quite possibly a play on the title of a classic work of Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, which discussed biblical creation stories in relationship to close parallels in ancient near eastern mythology (Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschicte Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* [Gottingen, 1895]).

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall,* 72.

[3] An early paper Bonhoeffer composed as an undergraduate shows the foundations of this later insight, and a view of higher criticism that critiques not its findings nor its methods, but on the demonstrated "ends" of its inquiry. On the terms of the higher critical approach, a young Bonhoeffer writes, "the concept of the canon disintegrates and becomes meaningless…the sources are distinguished, and the methods of the history of religions and form criticism fragment the larger and even the remaining short textual units into little pieces. After this total disintegration of the texts, historical criticism leaves the field of battle. Debris and fragments are left behind. Its work is apparently finished" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Can One Distinguish Between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics relate to this Question?" in *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927,* trans. Mary C. Nebelsick (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 286).

express what there was to say here."[4] For Bonhoeffer, the juxtaposition of these two divergent narratives encourages a reconsideration of our understanding of the Bible and the mode of its narration. Bonhoeffer adds,

> Who can speak of these things except in pictures? Pictures after all are not lies; rather they indicate things and enable the underlying meaning to shine through. To be sure, pictures do vary; the pictures of a child differ from those of an adult, and those of a person from the desert differ from those of a person from the city. One way or another, however, they remain true, to the extent that human speech, and even speech about abstract ideas can remain true at all—that is, to the extent that God dwells in them.[5]

The differences between the two creation stories, in other words, are themselves revelatory. When held together, the dissimilarities between these two representations of the same object testify to the confines of each respective picture. In this way, they remind their reader of the limits of all theological vision, and all theological speech. At the same time, these limits also testify to the grace of God who chooses to dwell not only in these individual representations but also and perhaps especially in the space between them. On this account, readers are invited from the first pages of scripture into particular habits of knowing and seeing, guided by the productive relation between refracted visions of the work of God.[6]

There is a remarkably similar dynamic at play in Bonhoeffer's treatment of the relationship between the first pair of human beings. In a later lecture in the same series, Bonhoeffer considers the text of Genesis 2:18-25, and the creation of Eve as a "suitable partner" for Adam, who has up to this point (at least in this version of the story) been "alone" among the creatures God has created—"alone" to bear the limits God established for this creature, limits the Genesis text figures symbolically in the form of the tree of knowledge that sits at the center of Adam's existence in the garden.

Adam wakes to the reality of an "other"—and these two distinct creatures become "one

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[4] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 72.
[5] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 81.
[6] It should also be said that despite the productive quality Bonhoeffer sees in the dissemblance between these adjacent narratives, he does hold a slightly tragic view of this reality of human speech, and considers the limits of human vision to be an explicit consequence of the Fall. He writes that human beings, "with all their powers of thinking …remain tied to this torn-apart world, to anti-thesis, to contradiction. This is so because our thinking too is only the expression of our being, of our existence, which is grounded in contradiction. Because we do not exist in unity, our thinking is torn apart as well" (Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 92).

flesh."[7] But, as Bonhoeffer is careful to clarify: "this becoming one never means the merging of the two or the abolition of their creatureliness as individuals."[8] In fact, Eve is a "suitable partner" to Adam by virtue of the fact that she constitutes a limit for him (just as he also constitutes a limit for her). While Adam was alone, he knew of limits, of human boundedness, of the prohibition against forbidden fruit, but "he could not love his limits." Thus "the helper who is a partner had to be at once the embodiment of Adam's limit and the object of Adam's love."[9] Bonhoeffer explains,

> The Creator knows that this free life as a creature can be borne within its limit only if it is loved, and out of unfathomable mercy the Creator creates the helper who is a partner suitable for a human being…Indeed love for the woman was now to be the human being's very life (in the deepest sense of the word).

Adam's love for Eve deepens and sharpens his sense of his own human limits and, at the same time, makes those limits easier to bear. Love makes the reality of both our creatureliness and our freedom real to us in the experience of the relationship between human beings "over-against-one-another, with-one-another, and in-dependence-upon-one-another."[10]

But Bonhoeffer warns his readers that there is also a shadow side to this gift of difference. He writes, "at the point where love for the other is obliterated, a human being can only hate the limit. A person then desires only, in an unbounded way, to possess the other or to destroy the other."[11] The desire to transgress that limit is not unlike the desire to transgress that visible limit at the center of garden—the desire to be *sicut deus* (like God) and not like a creature. This for Bonhoeffer, is the definition of sin.[12]

Love enables us to see these limits on different terms, as a form of *grace*[13]—an alleviation from the hopeless extension of our selves in the recognition of another independent "I". Grace, like the parable in a recent essay by Marilynne Robinson also addressed to the earth's beginnings: "primordial waters mantled a young planet…then somehow…a moon appeared, cool and demure

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[7] Genesis 2:24
[8] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 98.
[9] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 98.
[10] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall,* 64.
[11] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 99.
[12] For more on this discussion of the boundaries set up for each human subject by the other and the transgression of these boundaries as a forum of *sicut deus,* see Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*: *A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church,* trans. Joachim von Soosten, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
[13] Here one thinks also of the oft-quoted metaphor of Simone Weil: "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link" (Simone Weil, "Metaxu," in *Gravity and Grace,* trans. Arthur Wills [New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1957], 200).

but with pull enough to countervail gravity and lift the sea above the constraints of its own vastness."[14]

We might return from Bonhoeffer's meditation late in the lecture series on these two human creatures back to his interpretive reflections on the two creation stories he gave at the beginning, as I imagine many of his students might also have done. While Bonhoeffer himself never exposits the relationship between these two lectures, there is a strong resonance between the theological hermeneutics we find in the earlier lecture and the theological anthropology Bonhoeffer develops near the end. In his exegesis of each of these pairs, the fact of their respective unions, whether by virtue of their united flesh or their common membership in a united canon[15], cannot be separated from the reality of their ongoing difference from one another. Each member encounters its limit in *relation* to its respective other—a limit that has the potential to be an occasion for grace.

From these similarities, it stands to reason that the accompanying dangers of the gift of difference in human relations might also extend to the friction between paired representations of singular objects in Biblical literature. That is, that the inability to embrace the limits that these hermeneutic frictions reveal gives way to shame and the desire to possess the textual "other"—to force diverse narrative voices into a singular unity—or else to destroy or eliminate the other disparate text completely. This shame is the hermeneutic form of the refusal to accept the world as it has been given—the form of creaturely revelation we have received. "The possibility of a knowledge of God that comes from beyond the given word of God is humankind's being *sicut deus,*" Bonhoeffer writes—the refusal to receive the words that God has chosen and sanctified, the will to know and understand as gods and not as creatures. In desiring knowledge of God outside the form in which it has been revealed and received, "human beings renounce the word of God that approaches them again and again."[16]

II. Disfigured Reading

In my first chapter, I mentioned a second century exegete, Marcion of Sinope, who responded to the divergences between biblical materials (whether in the conflicts between the

[14] Marilynne Robinson, "Realism" in *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 273.
[15] Though we might also speak of the union of the two creation stories not only in terms of their membership within the canon, but also of their spatial juxtaposition within that canon.
[16] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 116.

representations of God in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, or contradictions between the testimony of adjacent gospel narratives) by expelling or suppressing difference in order to reclaim a unified, authoritative witness. Because he could not make sense of what he understood to be irreconcilable differences between the representations of God in the two testaments, Marcion argued that these canonical bodies must bear witness to two different gods: the lowly, vengeful Demiurge of the Hebrew Bible and the gracious Heavenly Father of the New Testament. Marcion created his own Bible in response to these hermeneutic tensions, sloughing off the first testament and using only one of four parallel gospels (Luke) along with select epistles to create a new, unified body of scripture.[17] Though Marcion's teachings were later condemned, his reading practices stand as one prominent root of Christian supersessionism, or the belief that the textual witness of the New Testament and the revelation of Jesus Christ both surpass and functionally replace that of the Hebrew Bible.

Marcion's teachings were revived in the early twentieth century by German theologian Adolf von Harnack who wrote a book praising Marcion for his principled exegesis, claiming him as the prototypical "modern believer," and even "the first reformer."[18] While Christianity might not have been ready for his revolutionary ideas in the second century, von Harnack argued that the Protestants of his own time needed Marcion's exegetical strategies in order to complete the work of Luther's reformation and to finally "free Christianity from the Old Testament."[19] Von Harnack's book on Marcion joined ranks with a number of similar texts that advocated for a further reformation of German Christianity by way of a stronger break with Judaism.[20] The Institut zur Erforshung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben (The Institute for the Study and Elimination of the Jewish Influence from German Eccelesial Life), for example, which opened its doors in 1939,[21] published a reformulated Bible in 1940 called *Die Botschaft Gottes* (The Message of God) under the leadership of New Testament scholar Walter

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[17] See Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 183-233.

[18] Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion. Der Moderne Glaübige des 2. Jahrhunderts der erste Reformator. Die Dorpater Preisschrift.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003).

[19] Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God,* trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1990), 133.

[20] Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Koninklijke: Brill, 2009).

[21] The establishment of this Institute comes the year after the pogroms of Kristallnacht, in which Nazi troops burned thousands of Hebrew Bibles and Torah scrolls in cities across Germany—a historical fact that Confino argues has largely been forgotten. See Alon Confino, "Why Did the Nazis Burn the Hebrew Bible? Nazi Germany, Representations of the Past, and the Holocaust," *The Journal of Modern History* 84 (2012): 369-400.

Grundmann. This Bible removed the first testament in its entirety and eradicated the differences between the gospels by shaping them into a single, coherent narrative. It also went further, removing any mention of Judaism, any genealogical connection between Jesus and the Jewish people, and any citation of the Hebrew Bible that did not, in their view, sufficiently condemn Jewish faith and practice.[22] Historian Alon Confino writes that during the holocaust, the Institute sold more than two hundred thousand copies of *Die Botschaft Gottes*—a Bible that in Confino's words "did not simply precede the physical annihilation but in some respects imagined it."[23]

In recent decades, theologians like James Cone, Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter have made similar connections between supersessionist readings of scripture and the history of white supremacy in the United States. In his recent book, *The Christian Imagination,* Jennings writes: "only by analyzing this mutual enabling of a supersessionist sensibility coupled with visions of life from within white supremacist imagining can one begin to discern the precise nature of Christian hubris."[24] This hubris, Jennings argues, gave rise to a "destructive form of joining" that displaces or subordinates the "others" it encounters. The hubris that originates in the "decoupling of Jesus from Israel's life"[25] as well as the severing of the Hebrew Bible from the New Testament has left the Christian imagination "diseased and disfigured."[26] "The loss is nothing less than the loss of a sense of our own creatureliness," Jennings writes,[27] a loss that causes us to read the world *sicut deus,* invoking Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall,* rather than *imago dei,* transgressing the limits between distinct terms in a desire to "stand in the center."[28]

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[22] Alon Confino, "Why Did the Nazis Burn the Hebrew Bible?" 383-384; Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Peter M. Head, "The Nazi Quest for an Aryan Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2 (2004): 55-89. The text of John 4:22, for example, which reads in standard Bibles as "salvation comes from the Jews," is re-rendered here as "the Jews are our misfortune" (Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History* 63 [1994]: 587-605, 595).

[23] Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 178.

[24] Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 292. J. Kameron Carter makes a similar argument in *Race: A Theological Account*, claiming that "modernity's racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity's quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots." Carter argues that this severing represents "the effort to establish fictive lines of purity within creation" (J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 4, 30).

[25] Willie Jennings, 259.

[26] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination,* 293. Walter Bruggemann makes a similar case when he writes that "Christian hegemony and domination…has produced not only anti-Semitism and supersessionist interpretation but also a serious misconstrual of our own tradition" (Walter Bruggemann, *The Book that Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005], 138).

[27] Willie Jennings, 293.

[28] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall,* 117.

In *On Christian Theology,* Rowan Williams explores similar concerns about misplaced desire of religious discourse to "stand in the center." In a discussion about the imaginative resources the Christian tradition must cultivate to avoid the disfiguring tendencies of "totalizing" discourse, Williams writes:

> To say that a religious discourse is 'about' the whole moral universe may be simply to say that it offers a sufficient imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity without evasion or untruthfulness; only when divorced from this context of a kind of imaginative skill does religious discourse fall into the trap of pretending to be a comprehensive system for plotting, connecting, 'fixing' and exhaustively accounting for the range of human behavior. In other words, religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God's point of view* (i.e. a total perspective)[29]

There may be many ways for the tradition to cultivate this "imaginative skill" that Williams alludes to here—a skill that weds human understanding to a sense of its own limitations and creatureliness and at the same time addresses the complexity of human understanding and human experience. But one prominent way in which the tradition might apprentice practitioners towards this form of imaginative practice is preserved in the structure of the biblical canon itself in its inclusion of variegated and frictive narrative perspectives. These frictions prevent readers from occupying any Archimedean point in relationship to the textual tradition or the revelation of the character and nature of God. As Williams writes elsewhere: "a god whose essential function is to negate the 'otherness' and discontinuity of historical experience, and so to provide for us an ideal *locus standi,* a perspective transcending or reconciling discontinuity into a system is clearly an idol."[30]

There are real dangers, in other words, to forging these kinds of simple unities, whether manifested overtly in German nationalist anti-Semitism, or in more subtle erasures of difference within the canon that might stand as obstacle to its purity. By prizing an ideal of the tradition's coherence over and against the material presence of internal textual incongruities, we risk becoming the kind of readers who must eliminate, silence, or suppress certain voices in order to eradicate difference and claim a unified, pure view of the whole—a logic that bears some analogous relation to the patterns of reasoning characteristic of racial or religious supremacy. Perhaps one way to refuse

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[29] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology,* 6.
[30] Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71-92, 79.

both the lifeless sedimentation of the tradition or its fearful transfiguration into some illusion of "pure" God-like knowledge is to keep the seams of the text visible and open, and to posit the wholeness of the tradition not as a presumption or certainty, but as an ongoing task. The hermeneutic friction between biblical narrators stands as a reminder of this task, inviting readers to put disparate testimonies, images, narratives, and metaphors into relation, instilling a form of patience that comes by way of dwelling with these tensions, and cultivating an imagination that meets difference in the text and in the world with no felt need to evade, suppress, or destroy it.

III. Conclusion

Van A. Harvey once wrote that "biblical criticism…constitutes a skeleton in the closet of Christian theology and the history of theology since the middle of the nineteenth century may be seen as a series of unsuccessful salvage operations mounted to deal with this problem."[31] What Harvey saw as a problem relating to the understanding of method in historical inquiry, I have considered in the space of this dissertation as a problem relating to the way in which the Bible is understood as a literary object. The history of literary readings of the Bible and of theological engagement with the Bible's literary form over the course of the last century can be similarly understood as a set of attempts to rescue this text from the fragmenting forces of higher critical inquiry by way of an approach to literary reading oriented toward textual unity and coherence. The skeleton in this case is not biblical criticism, nor the literary reading, nor still narrative theology, but the frictions and fissures in the text itself that each of these schools of interpreters seemed determined to erase or overcome.

Alongside this history, I have offered an alternative account of how we might read these hermeneutic frictions not as threats to the literary integrity or spiritual value of the Bible but rather as promising sites for both literary and theological reflection. In this conclusion, I will sketch out a brief, propaedeutic proposal for how modern literary readers and modern theologians might begin to think about the promise of friction.

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[31] Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), ix.

Reading Frictions Literarily

I began my dissertation with a discussion of the state of the field, and the hard line that is often drawn between higher criticism and modern literary readings of the Bible. This line emerged as a consequence of the way that higher critics read the hermeneutic friction between biblical narrators. The suspicious approach scholars like Wellhausen took to these inner-textual tensions caused a sharp split between what were now deemed "historical investments" in the frictions and fissures of the text and "literary investments" in the unity of its final form. As a result of this division of interpretive labors, textual frictions were exiled as the province of historical inquiry, excluded from the proper business of literary reading.

As I have argued, however, friction between biblical narrators is one of the more persistent "literary" elements of the biblical canon, and a form of literary reading that excludes attention to these fissures on principle is more invested in an apologetic enterprise than an exegetical one. But to defend the text against the investigation of its own contents, or to place this investigation at some remove from what it means to read the Bible as a literary text is misguided, however noble its intentions might be.[32]

While modern biblical scholars who continue the work of higher criticism once guarded this disciplinary boundary with the same vigilance as the literary readers on the other side, many of these same critics have revised their previous positions on the incompatibility of these two approaches to the Bible. Joel Baden, for example, who once claimed that these disciplines were "arguing in different languages," comparing their fruitless confrontation to "a scholarly Tower of Babel,"[33] now holds that "the divorce of final-form reading and source-critical analysis need not be irrevocable."[34] Baden explains, along similar lines to the case made by Sommer in the previous chapter, "the presence in the canonical text of distinct voices affects any reading of the whole," adding, "the shape of an edited text is by definition intentional, and that intentionality, however it is manifested, is a crucial guide for how the reader is to approach the text."[35] In other words, literary readings of the Bible could be enriched by the insights of source-criticism, yielding a more complex image of the

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[32] Meir Sternberg makes this point well when he writes, "They speak as if there were one Bible for the historian, another for the theologian, and another for the linguist, another for the geneticist, and still another for the literary critic. But there are not enough Bibles to go around, and even Solomon's wisdom cannot divide the only one we do possess among the various claimants. Its discourse remains indivisible for all" (Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 17).
[33] Joel Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009): 209-224, 224.
[34] Joel Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 129
[35] Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs,* 130-131.

rivalries and contests that play out in the text's final form—not just among brothers or between warring kingdoms, but in the voices the text lends to divergent perspectives.

Biblical scholar John Barton makes a similar argument about the relationship between the study of the Bible as a composite text—attention to its internal frictions and fissures—and the study of the Bible as literature. Barton writes, "We are likely to get further only if modern literary critics are willing to join in the discussion, and offer us models from literature (either ancient or modern) where similar phenomena occur *and where we know how they were or are handled interpretively*." Barton adds, "Historical criticism may be able to tell us *how* the Pentateuch got put together, we may need help from literary critics if we are to understand *why*."[36]

There are many ways that literary readers might take up this task, many ways in which the literary imagination might address the diverse testimony of biblical narrators without making them into a simple composite for aesthetic purposes. Eliot and Melville remind us that the imaginative activity of literary reading need not be solely or even primarily *esemplastic*[37]—drawing all things together into a unity without remainder. Instead, interruptions, misunderstandings, and frictions might be precisely "that which sets the mental powers into a swing," as Kant once wrote, stimulating readers' imaginations as they grasp for new ways to conceive of objects beyond the scope of their former concepts, and at the same time, helping them to reflect on the manner of their seeing, knowing and understanding.[38] Rather than systematically avoiding these conflicts, literary readers might find themselves particularly suited to offer "other reasons" for the Bible's frictive composition[39] and to assist readers who might wish to see these rivalries and interferences as sources of textual meaning.

Reading Frictions Theologically

To this point, I have sidestepped certain theological questions about the origins or intentions of these frictions—questions about how and why these fissures made their way into the Bible in the first place. I side-stepped these questions first, because of the varied material conditions that stand

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[36] John Barton, "Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground," in *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton,* 127-136, 133.
[37] This is a term from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who uses it to describe the faculty of the readerly imagination to take diverse impressions and shape them into one coherent sense (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 168-169).
[38] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 142.
[39] See my comments on Richard Moulton in the previous chapter.

behind the authorship and redaction of the diverse body of texts I have taken up in my study of frictions, and second, because these questions send our inquiry up the ladder, so to speak, and ask that we speculate about how God understands these tensions, or what God intends by their inclusion. Are the conflicts between biblical narrators byproducts of the human corruption of divine words, or are they providentially ordered from the start as a curriculum to teach us a form of attention and responsibility in relationship to the tradition?

Talmudic scholar David Weiss Halivni speaks about these difficulties and conflicts in scripture as "maculations" or wounds.[40] In the wake of the Babylonian exile, Halivni writes that the people of Israel recover the text as we find it now, "marred by contradictions, lacunae, and various other maculations whose provenance appears more human than divine."[41] For Halivni, these frictions are evidence of human fallibility and waywardness—a sign that those who were entrusted with a divine word did not protect, but rather corrupted it.[42] At the same time, these wounds are the materials by which human beings come to participate in the restorative work of God[43]—restoring the wounded text by means of careful, communal labors of interpretation (labors that *add* words and readings while refusing to amend or alter the text itself). By means of these restorative labors, readers learn how to repair not only the wounded text, but also the wounded world (*tikkun olam*).[44]

Reading alongside Augustine or Origen, on the other hand, we might read these frictions providentially rather than soteriologically. As I mentioned in the first chapter, Augustine saw textual difficulties as part of the Bible's carefully ordered pedagogical design.[45] Origen read them along similar lines as invitations toward higher forms of spiritual meaning. In *De Principiis* IV, Origen

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[40] Halivni is specifically speaking about those parts of scripture that make it difficult, even impossible, to put the law of God into practice. The problem comes, in other words, as a consequence of trying to perform a text that at times preserves variant versions of the same commands alongside one another (Halivni, *Revelation Restored*, 33).

[41] Halivni, *Revelation Restored,* 2

[42] For Halivni, this is both a historical and a theological claim, which he calls "*Chate'u Yisrael*"—Israel sinned. He writes, "According to the biblical account itself, the people of Israel forsook the Torah, in the dramatic episode of the golden calf, only forty days after the revelation at Sinai. From that point on, until the time of Ezra, the scriptures reveal that the people of Israel were steeped in idolatry and negligent of the Mosaic law. *Chate'u Yisrael,* as a theological account, explains that in the period of neglect and syncretism the Torah of Moses became blemished and maculated. The need to reconstitute and canonize the scriptural Torah in Ezra's time, according to *Chate'u Yisrael,* arose from the textual difficulties caused by centuries of neglect." (Halivni, *Revelation Restored,* 4).

[43] Ezra provides Halivni with his model of restorative or reparative reading—an approach to the text of the Torah that acknowledges the existence of maculations while at the same time refusing to amend or alter the text to expunge these difficulties. "Ezra and his entourage, despite their prophetic stature and their intimacy with the written word, were unable to impose corrective alterations on the text itself. Even as they confronted the need to supplement the written word with adjunct explication, the agents of canonization treated their scriptural legacy as a sacred and inviolable trust." (Halivni, *Revelation Restored,* 6).

[44] See Peter Ochs, "Foreword: Revelation Restored as Postcritical Theology," in *Revelation Restored,* xi-xviii.

[45] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* 147.10

writes that the Holy Spirit has arranged some "stumbling blocks" to come into the middle of the legal and narrative materials of scripture, lest readers be led away by the utility of the law or the beauty of the prose and never arrive at insights truly worthy of God.[46]

Whether frictions are read along soteriological lines—as evidence of human fallibility—or along the lines of a divinely appointed providential order, it is noteworthy that in each case they stand as invitations, or better, as provocations toward deeper forms of interpretive attention. Frictions interrupt, pause, pull up short, and give rise to thought, both in our smaller acts of exegetical reflection and in our larger attempts to address how these hermeneutic frictions might inform our understanding of revelation, sanctification, and the knowledge of God. It is noteworthy that while these thinkers disagree about the origin of these frictions—whether they came into the text as wounds, pedagogical tools, or divinely appointed stumbling blocks—they share a sense of their capacity to apprentice readers toward forms of reading characterized by the attentiveness, responsibility, and patience that such difficulties demand of their readers. That is, regardless of how these hermeneutic frictions made their way into the Bible, there is a kind of holiness that now inheres in them, or inheres in the forms of reading these wounds or stumbling blocks occasion,[47] such that we should not wish or will the text to be otherwise.[48]

If frictions can become occasions for new forms of thought, these frictions should not be avoided or suppressed, but rather diligently sought out. Rowan Williams writes,

> Given that it is…*difficulty* that drives the sense of reality to which we are painfully accountable, it is not surprising that making things more difficult is so common, so 'normal' a tool of exploration and discovery. By turning up the temperature in this way, we identify questions that can only be answered when we imagine new contexts, and so new connections, new relationships…[49]

For Williams, as for Ricoeur, poetry gives us the best access to this particular feature of language: "language under pressure deployed as a means of exploration."[50] In this pressurized form, language provides "an invitation to see one thing through the 'lens' of an unexpected other," challenging our frames of reference and expanding our sense of the whole. At the same time, the form of dialectical

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[46] See Origen, *De Principiis* 5.15

[47] I am indebted to my teacher Peter Ochs for this insight, which he outlines in "Foreword: Revelation Restored as Postcritical Theology," in *Revelation Restored,* xi-xviii.

[48] It is perhaps, as Augustine once said of the scars on the bodies of martyrs: "in those wounds there will be no deformity, but only dignity…a beauty in the body but not of the body" (Augustine, *City of God* 22.19).

[49] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language,* 130-131.

[50] Williams, *Edge of Words,* 134.

labor demanded by frictive representation offers "a reminder that we are always seeing 'through the other,' that we never see anything in its own isolated terms, and that we cannot rule in advance which 'others' are acceptable and which unacceptable in the business of extending and enlarging our perception." If the friction between biblical narratives offers a similar venue for exploratory thought, then we might imagine a practice of reading that functions on the model of biblical poetry: juxtaposing two versions of the same story side by side and allowing the friction between them to give rise to new modes of exegetical reflection (on each member of the conjoined pair, and on their relationship to one another).

Finally, the friction between biblical narrators might serve an instructive purpose for the discipline of theology. Williams writes, "If it is true that the Bible tells what we need to know for our temporal and eternal well-being, the mode of communication tells us something about God's way with human creation; it matters not only *what* God tells us but what is communicated by the character of the communicating act."[51] The friction between biblical narrators provides a salient reminder of the limits of our individual perceptive faculties—particularly with reference to our understanding of God. At the same time, the "constructive interferences" between the discourse of biblical narrators—the ways that these points of interference give rise to thought such that these discourses might together yield something more than the sum of their individual insights—invite us to seek out those whose ways of speaking about God or thinking about God are quite different from our own. Here again, the inevitable conflicts and frictions between these diverse perspectives are not to be avoided, but heightened. These frictions, after all, are the site of the productive "convergence of all these partial discourses" in their attempts at narrating and naming God.

[51] Rowan Williams, "The Fourfold Chord: Theology and the Plurality of the Gospel Witness," 339.

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