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Biblical Studies as the Meeting Point of the Humanities

The ideal does not always translate into the real. Just at the point where the speaker of Deuteronomy begins to propound a utopian program to eliminate poverty—"There shall be no one in need among you!" (Deut 15:4)—he quickly pulls himself back to earth to confront the gap between vision and reality: "If there is one in need among you . . . " (Deut 15:7). Utopian vision and pragmatic preparation are here separated only by a single word, since the Hebrew phrases involved are otherwise identical.[1] The

[1] Precisely that similarity of construction points to an editorial interpolation. From a historical-critical point of view, the statement in Deut 15:4 is most likely the work of a later editor, stressing the benefits that follow from obedience to the Torah, supplementing but also contradicting the original text, whereby Deut 15:7 would have been the continuation of Deut 15:3. See A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 248. With the insertion marked by its close correspondence to the original text, at issue is a variation of a formal scribal technique, the repetitive resumption or *Wiederaufnahme*, as a marker of editorial activity. On this and related editorial markers, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17–20; and later in this volume at p. 117.

same particle that adds declamatory force to the initial assertion (כי) is also the one that forms the later conditional statement. As with the ancient text, so with contemporary scholarship: the dividing line between utopian vision and pragmatic reality hinges on a single word. In an ideal world, the concept of canon might provide a meeting point for the humanities. It would offer a bridge between the multiple, separate disciplines that operate, more or less explicitly, with canonical collections of texts and even canonical methods of research. The reality, however, is that, even as the separate disciplines actively reassess their canons—the intellectual and historical forces that defined their canons, the ideologies and biases encoded in those canons, the degree of adaptability of those canons, and the extent to which their canons promote or inhibit cultural change and intellectual renewal—there is a striking absence of dialogue between disciplines on the canon as the common point of ferment.

Even more striking than this lack of interdisciplinary dialogue is the failure of contemporary theory to engage with academic Biblical Studies.[2] A number of Bible scholars have sought to take postmodern theory into account in their work and to explore its impact upon biblical scholarship.[3] It seems to me that colleagues in comparative

[2] As noted by Jonathan Z. Smith, "Canons, Catalogues and Classics," in *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers Presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), Held at Leiden, 9–10 January 1997* (ed. Arie van der Kooij and Karel van der Toorn; SHR 82; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 295–311 (at 295–96).

[3] John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005); and, using empire theory and postcolonial theory to help explain the

literature and related fields have not engaged historical-critical work in Biblical Studies to the same degree.[4] The contemporary turn away from philology, as if it were not a humanistic discipline, contributes to this problem.[5] Even the recent infatuation of some literary theorists with ancient Jewish midrash is no exception. It romanticizes rabbinic hermeneutics as championing radical textual indeterminacy, and thus heralds the ancient rabbis as the precursors of modern critical trends.[6] By

promulgation of the Pentateuch, Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Local Law in an Imperial Context: The Role of Torah in the (Imagined) Persian Period," in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 57–76. See further Robert P. Carroll, "Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 50–66; Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1997); George Aichele et al. [as the Bible and Culture Collective], *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

4 Several literary scholars have made serious such attempts, the most intense effort being that of Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; and that of James Nohrnberg, *Like unto Moses: The Constitution of an Interruption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). On Sternberg's isolation from the current state of Biblical Studies, see the reviews by Francis Landy, *JHS* 3 (2000–2001), http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/reviews/review013.htm; cited September 28, 2007; and Stephen P. Weitzman, *JQR* 94 (2004): 537–41.

5 See the passionate affirmation of and nostalgia for philology in the posthumously published volume by Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Columbia Themes in Philosophy; New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Especially significant are the essays "The Return to Philology" and "Introduction to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*" (57–84 and 85–118).

6 See *Midrash and Literature* (ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

disregarding the importance of law and privileging narrative, that approach completely distorts the priorities of classical rabbinic interpretation, and thus amounts to a projection onto the sources rather than a critical engagement with them.[7] As in psychoanalysis, so also in literary history: a projection always involves a repression, one that seems to apply more broadly in this case. At the precise moment when the canon has become such a point of contention in the humanities, critically absent from the discussion is academic Biblical Studies: the one discipline devoted to exploring what a canon is, how it emerges historically, how its texts relate to one another, and how it affects the community that espouses it.[8]

The same omission in comparative research on Scripture by academic Religious Studies, the sister discipline of Biblical Studies, only doubles the irony. That omission is

[7] In support of the position argued here, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 35–38; David Stern, "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies? Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash," *Proof* 5 (1985): 96–103; idem, "Midrash and Hermeneutics: Polysemy vs. Indeterminacy," in idem, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 15–38; and Azzan Yadin, "The Hammer on the Rock: Mekhilta Deuteronomy and the Question of Rabbinic Polysemy," *JSQ* 9 (2002): 1–27.

[8] One might profitably consult *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological and Philosophical Perspectives* (ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). In contrast, in an otherwise stimulating exploration of the significance of canon for law and constitutional theory, scripture is only invoked once, in a pro forma etymology of the word (J. M. Balkin and Sanford Levinson, *Legal Canons* [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 32n1). Neither the editors nor the contributors explore whether Biblical Studies might provide a useful model for understanding legal hermeneutics.

evident, for example, in the otherwise valuable collection, *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*.[9] Despite the stated goal of rethinking older models, the volume inadvertently reifies older assumptions by using the completed canon of Scripture as its intellectual point of departure. The absence of a contribution by a biblical scholar ironically perpetuates the gap between the comparative study of religion and philological analysis of the scriptural sources of religion. Barbara A. Holdrege may well be justified in pointing out that "biblical and orientalist scholars . . . have focused on particular religious texts rather than on scripture as a general religious phenomenon."[10] Nonetheless, the opposite extreme also entails a risk. It makes her essay's stated goal—to recover the immanent religiosity associated with texts in ancient Israel—methodologically impossible to achieve. Holdrege construes the ancient Israelite sources from the perspective of how they are read by later Jewish tradition, not how they functioned and were read in ancient Israel itself. This anachronistic frame of reference is evident as she describes the biblical Hymn to Wisdom (Prov 8:22–31) as a "pre-Rabbinic text."[11]

This absence of dialogue with Biblical Studies impoverishes contemporary theory in disciplines across the humanities and deprives it of intellectual models that

[9] See *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (ed. Miriam Levering; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[10] Barbara A. Holdrege, "The Bride of Israel: The Ontological Status of Scripture in the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic Traditions," in *Rethinking Scripture*, 180–261 (at 180).

[11] Holdrege, "Bride of Israel," 188. See also eadem, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

would actually advance its own project. Making this argument from a different perspective, Robert Alter rejects the postmodern view of the canon as a form of "ideological coercion" and argues instead that it points to a "transhistorical textual community."[12] But while my sympathies lie with that alternative approach, my historical training makes me apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to it. The very concept of transhistorical textual community is itself a construction, or perhaps a counter-construction, that affirms certain values. It is not clear to me that the earliest anthologies of authoritative or prestigious texts for Second Temple Judaism were assembled for purely "transhistorical" purposes. More likely, such collections would have been intended to provide a bulwark against Greco-Roman culture or even against dominant forms of Second Temple Judaism, as in the case of the Samarian/Samaritan community with its Pentateuch or the community at Wadi Qumran, with the Dead Sea Scrolls. From this perspective, any transhistorical community that comes into existence through the canon is already a transformation of some earlier community served by the canon. Surely the Dutch Reformed Church's appropriation of the canon through most of the past century to legitimate apartheid in South Africa was not a disinterested enterprise, any more than the important ways that the Bible is currently being used

[12] Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 5. In contrast, Frank Kermode's recent advocacy of the canon is, uncharacteristically, intellectually tepid. It works with a vague notion of aesthetic pleasure that does not clearly engage ethical issues or the social location of a canon. See idem, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (ed. Robert Alter; The Berkeley Tanner Lectures; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

in South Africa to help renew a postapartheid society, now based upon equality.[13]

German Studies provides an example of how the comparative perspective of the biblical canon might offer a richer perspective on ostensibly discipline-specific questions. The more the discipline investigates its own history, the more salient is the missing dialogue with Biblical Studies. There was no German nation-state until the unification of the scores of German-speaking kingdoms, principalities, and free towns by Otto von Bismarck in 1871. But German writers and thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had already laid its groundwork through their promulgation of a common art, literature, and music that united German speakers as a *Kulturnation*.

Although not yet an independent political entity, the German nation already existed as a *Land der Dichter und Denker* [land of poets and thinkers].[14] The German nation

[13] See Louis Jonker, "Reforming History: The Hermeneutical Significance of the Books of Chronicles," *VT* 57 (2007): 21–44.

[14] Germanists often attribute this phrase to the French writer and traveler Madame de Staël (1766–1817), in her influential, *De l'Allemagne* (1810), although it never appears in her work. At best, she refers to Germany as "la patrie de la pensée"; elsewhere, she notes "La plupart *des écrivains et des penseurs* travaillent dans la solitude . . . " (Mme La Baronne [Anne-Louise-Germaine] de Staël Holstein, *De l'Allemagne* [3 vols.; Paris: H. Nicolle, 1810; reprint, London: John Murray, 1813], 1: 5, 16 [emphasis added]; eadem, *De l'Allemagne: Nouvelle Édition* [ed. Jean de Pange and Simone Balayé; 5 vols.; Paris: Hachette, 1958], 1: 21, 38). The attribution to de Staël is repeatedly assumed, however, by the highly regarded philosopher and essayist Helmuth Plessner, where *diese Lobesformel* [formula of praise] is rapidly inverted into an alliterative lament for what was lost. See Helmuth Plessner, "Ein Volk der Dichter und Denker?: Zu einem Wort der Madame de Staël" [1964], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6: *Die verspätete Nation* (ed. Günter Dux et al.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp,

was in effect created and sustained by its literary canon before it had a unified political existence. That situation cries out for an exploration of the parallel with how the scriptural canon sustained "the People of the Book" for the two millennia of their life in the Diaspora. Heinrich Heine's much-touted notion of the Bible as "ein portatives Vaterland" [a portable Fatherland], more frequently invoked than critically examined, does not seem very helpful in this context.[15] However conveniently it has become a facile catchword for recent work in diaspora poetics and

1982), 281–91. The cliché is widespread on the Internet, even on university Web sites (http://www.uni-rostock.de/fakult/philfak/fkw/iph/thies/19.Jahrhundert.html) and official sources of information, such as the state library of Rheinland-Pfalz (http://www.lbz-rlp.de/cms/landesbibliothekszentrum/presse/pressemeldungen/pressemeldung/artikel/71/46/index.html?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5BpS%5D=1175613624&cHash=a3f93f6e6b) (cited April 10, 2007). On the phrase as a comforting panacea at odds with twentieth-century history, see Jeffrey L. Sammons, "The Land Where the Canon B(l)ooms: Observations on the German Canon and Its Opponents, There and Here," in *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate* (Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture 23; New York: Garland, 2001), 117–33 (at 119). On the German reception of de Staël's work, see Michel Espagne, "'De l'Allemagne,'" in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze; 3 vols.; 4th ed.; Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 1: 225–41.

15 For Heinrich Heine's original quote, see idem, *Geständnisse: Geschrieben im Winter 1854*; reprinted in Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften in zwölf Bänden*, vol. 11: *Schriften 1851–1855* (ed. Klaus Briegleb; Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1968), 483. Within biblical studies, Frank Crüsemann has directed new attention to the quote in his essay on the function and development of the canon of the Old Testament ("'Das portative Vaterland': Struktur und Genese des alttestamentlichen Kanons," in idem, *Kanon und Sozialgeschichte: Beiträge zum Alten Testament* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 227–49. However, he does not investigate how the quote functions for Heine, and assumes the accuracy of the

Old Testament theology, Heine's metaphor does not offer an informed reading of Jewish literary or social history.[16] It has much more to do with Heine's own well-justified sense of dislocation and rejection—and thus with yearning for membership in a German literary tradition from which he was excluded. Despite his eager attempts to find acceptance as a German writer, even after baptism, he continued to be regarded by Germans as a Jew. Thereafter, he emigrated to France, where, in irony that seems bitterly inevitable, he was considered a German exile.[17]

The extent to which the classical past of the German literary canon is actually an ideological construction, an ex post facto product of deliberate shaping by later "editors" of that canon, only reinforces the relevance of the missing perspective of Biblical Studies, where such issues have long been recognized in the shaping of the canon. Using a range of techniques already well honed by their ancient religious counterparts, therefore, German literary historians of the nineteenth century modified medieval manuscripts before publication, excised early "Frenchified" novels from their studies, and sanctified works by Goethe and Schiller as

quote as a description for how Jewish identity was maintained in the Diaspora.

16 In medieval Judaism, for example, Scripture is not metaphorically described in terms of homeland, nor did it replace Zion in its symbolic power. More accurately, the community would achieve its continuity and grounding in terms of ritual, halakic observance, and community organization. If anything, the shared longing for a homeland would provide a means for cultural identity and self-definition. Scripture itself would have played a secondary or tertiary role.

17 See Anat Feinberg, "Abiding in a Haunted House: The Issue of *Heimat* in Contemporary German-Jewish Writing," *New German Critique* 70 (1997): 161–81.

classic, all in order to recover a "true" German character unsullied by any influences too foreign, modern, or feminine.[18] Early-modern German editors may have differed significantly in ideology from their ancient Near Eastern counterparts, but they employed strikingly similar techniques (literary and linguistic selectivity) to pursue a common goal: the creation of a pristine past that can serve as an enduring charter. The same issue of ideological shaping has also been identified in recent work on the "construction" of the disciplines of Theology, Classics, and Oriental Studies in German universities during the nineteenth century.[19]

In addition to intellectual models, there is something more fundamental at stake. Biblical Studies provides a way of critically engaging the ideological assumptions of contemporary theory, whose objections to the notion of a canon are certainly understandable: for being exclusive; for encoding class, race, or gender bias; for silencing competing or less prestigious voices; for ignoring difference; for arresting social change; for enshrining privilege. Yet in

[18] For the discipline's struggles with this legacy, see *Rethinking "Germanistik": Canon and Culture* (ed. Robert Bledsoe et al.; Berkeley Insights in Linguistics and Semiotics 6; New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

[19] See Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); 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); idem, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Suzanne L. Marchand, "Philhellenism and the *Furor Orientalis*," *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (2004): 331–58; and Christian Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (trans. Barbara Harshav; Studies in Jewish History and Culture 10; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005).