

Preface

THE IRREDUCIBLE STRANGENESS OF THE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR

This immodest manifesto began life as a modest conference paper. Entitled “After ‘After Theory,’ and Other Apocalyptic Conceits in Literary and Biblical Studies,” it was part of a joint AAR/SBL session¹ convened to consider the consequences for biblical studies of the alleged—indeed, widely trumpeted—demise of poststructuralist theory (“Theory” for short) in literary studies. As two biblical scholars long associated with Theory, we might have been expected (might even have expected ourselves) to utter a fairly perfunctory lament that Theory was still widely perceived as a rather distant satellite orbiting the historical-critical core of the biblical studies discipline, and now that satellite seemed in danger of disintegrating without ever having come close enough to register on the hermeneutical horizons of most biblical scholars. Somewhat to our relief, however, a more interesting project than lament emerged in the course of writing the paper. Precisely by thinking the history and practices of our discipline from a tangent—and what could be more tangential to the waking interests of the average biblical scholar than poststructuralist theory?—we began to reimagine the genealogy and machinery of our discipline in ways that were unfamiliar, not least to

1. Specifically (and more long-windedly), it was a joint session of the Bible, Theology, and Postmodernity Group and the Reading, Theory, and the Bible Section held at the Joint Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature at San Diego, California, in November 2007.

ourselves. In the counterintuitive history of biblical scholarship that results, historical criticism and literary criticism do not take up their habitual roles as perpetual sparring partners, even when the literary criticism in question is armed with poststructuralist theory. Instead, historical criticism and literary criticism are both seen as contributing to the distinctly modern phenomenon that historian Jonathan Sheehan has termed “the Enlightenment Bible.”

The irreducible strangeness of the biblical scholar is the central topic of this brief book. The book tells the tale of the invention of a particular and peculiar academic entity—the professional biblical scholar—and provides a defamiliarizing redescription of what he or she is uniquely designed to do. The book is not a traditional history of historical-critical biblical scholarship as an aetiological saga in which the authentically “historical” and “critical” identity markers arrive in increments until the features in the emerging portrait have transformed into our own. Nor is it a saga of latter-day redemption in which the (literary-)Theoretical arrives, however belatedly, to save us from a sclerotic history-obsessed legacy, though we ourselves, admittedly, have delighted in spinning such soteriological stories in the past. On this occasion, we prefer to sidestep these oft-recited narratives to ask certain fundamental but under-examined questions. Why, in early modernity, did the scholarly mind come to associate the Bible so determinedly with history? Why did the “criticism” in biblical criticism resolutely and exclusively come to take the form of *historical* criticism? What other forms might biblical criticism have taken? What forgotten forms did early modern biblical criticism actually take? What untried forms might biblical criticism yet take?

Responding to a loss of theological authority, the Bible was rehabilitated on human and cultural grounds in the eighteenth century. The Bible was re-universalized, so to speak, and its relevance newly perpetuated in such unlikely domains as philology, ancient history, archaeology, ancient Near Eastern languages, and the quest for the ever-elusive authorial hand. The zones of potential inquiry were myriad but also severely circumscribed, not least because the emerging discipline eventually set aside and repressed what we are calling “moral critique”—critique of the morality of certain biblical material and even of the biblical God—though such critique had featured prominently in the discipline’s earlier stages, as we show. This repressed terrain does not ordinarily appear in standard histories of the discipline, even though

its relationship to contemporary politicized forms of biblical scholarship, such as feminist, ideological, and postcolonial forms, is profound.

But the phenomenon of the Enlightenment Bible has profound ramifications for other aspects of contemporary biblical scholarship as well. We argue that the entire series of biblical-scholarly raids on (mainly literary) Theory has been conducted in the long shadow of the Enlightenment Bible. What we term the “first wave” of Theory in biblical studies extended the project of the Enlightenment Bible and invested it with new energy. Biblical literary criticism was largely dedicated to the retrieval of the Bible as a supreme work of human artistry, while biblical cultural studies demonstrated, even celebrated, the Bible’s cultural ubiquity and hence its abiding cultural relevance. But the reach of the Enlightenment Bible extended even farther. In the first wave of its reception in biblical studies, Theory was treated as “secular” demystifying stuff that enabled even ostensibly postmodern biblical scholars to carry on the early modern task of translating the “religious” into human terms and cultural categories.

Ironically, these developments overlapped with an unlikely turn in Theory that began in earnest in the 1990s—the deployment of religion and the Bible by thinkers not themselves religionists or biblical scholars to unsettle the givenness of the “human” and the “secular.” This Theoretical “turn to religion” has since been supplemented by historical and analytic inquiry into the formation of fundamental modern categories such as secularism and critique. And it seems to us that it is here, at this very curious and specific interdisciplinary intersection, that biblical studies has most to contribute, and most to gain, in its engagement with Theory. What biblical studies most stands to gain, and needs to gain, we would argue, is a certain turn—a certain return—to philosophy. If Theorists have been staging a turn to religion, and even theology, to unsettle and spook philosophy, then Theory-inclined biblical scholars ought to stage a return to philosophy via Theory to unsettle and spook the disciplinary status quo, philosophy being another repressed element that figured prominently in the formative phase of the discipline, as we also show.

The return of philosophy to biblical studies, however, has already occurred in part. An important reason why Theory has proved so attractive to some biblical scholars is that it has offered a means of reconnecting to certain basic questions of philosophy that had been part and parcel of educated public response to the Bible in the eighteenth and

even nineteenth centuries, but that became severed from biblical studies when the discipline began to fixate more narrowly on the historical (for reasons we attempt to explain), understood increasingly in a fervently exclusivist sense. The early manifestations of a return of philosophy to biblical studies via Theory, however, were often naïve. The revelation that knowledge of the object (in this case, the biblical text) can only ever be mediated by the subject, and hence objectivity by subjectivity, was trumpeted as a postmodern epiphany in work that was frequently oblivious to how such issues had been hotly-debated ones for philosophy when biblical scholarship was still in its infancy.

But the fact that an attack on the phantom of “objectivity” was seen as one of the most unsettling challenges for biblical scholarship showed to what extent the latter had become the ultimate discipline for enacting scrupulous separation between the observing subject and the religious object—together with all the machinery of “objectivity,” “neutrality,” and “disinterestedness” that went along with it (even if many historical critics now try to throw a cover over the machinery). What other discipline in the humanities has striven more determinedly to perform the separation of the properly critical subject from the properly studied object? What other discipline has been more anxious to separate the professional from the confessional, the public from the personal, through the development of ever more meticulously honed critical tools? What other discipline has been more fixated on “method” in consequence? Loud battles between “believing” and “unbelieving” biblical scholars may well be as far from the substance of the matter as battles between the historical critics and the literary critics. For almost all biblical scholarship has been enacted within the massive edifice of the Enlightenment Bible, it seems to us, by which we mean that almost all biblical scholars have thoroughly internalized Enlightenment modes of relating to the Bible—modes anxiously marked as distinct from the devotional and the confessional, the pietistic and the homiletical, through a fetishistic display of methodological expertise as the primary badge of professional identity.

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this oddly fraught location that now positions biblical scholarship to make its most important contribution to contemporary academic debate. One of the principal challenges of Theory in the “second wave” will be to denaturalize and defamiliarize the discipline of biblical studies, to engender metacritical reflection that asks why the professional study of the Bible took the particular and

peculiar forms that it has and how it might be different than it is. Such defamiliarizing histories of the discipline will need to traverse more complex terrain than flashbulb moments of genius occurring now and then in the minds of individual biblical scholars in Germany, Britain, or France. Biblical scholarship, then or now, cannot be thought independently of social, cultural, and political space—the very separation of the “social,” “political,” and “cultural” from the “religious” being an effect produced by, among other things, nascent biblical scholarship, hence its relevance to wider academic debate. Rethinking the history of biblical scholarship in such ways will help us understand how moderns have constructed the social, the cultural, the political, and the religious—and potentially help us to reconfigure those intractable configurations. A discipline that is constantly distinguishing itself from the pre-critical and pre-modern (and now from the postmodern as well) and relating its own genesis to the epiphany of the modern and critical in early modern Europe clearly has much to contribute to contemporary discussion about the formulation and reification of some of the primary categories and dichotomies of modernity. These include the public and the private, the secular and the religious, the rational and the supernatural, the universal and the particular, the historical and the theological, the philosophical and the theological, the critical and the pre-critical, and the human and its others, both animal and divine.

As Theory is to biblical studies, so biblical studies is to modernity (especially as epitomized by the academy). Both appear peripheral and tangential, and either too minor to merit an apocalypse or even a funeral or so well into their dotage that one can simply sit back and await their inevitable demise. In both cases, however, it proves extremely productive to think the dominant phenomenon—biblical studies on the one hand, modernity on the other—in relation to that which it imagines most minor, moribund, irrelevant, a matter of private interest only. We can learn most about biblical studies and modernity by looking at what they most want to die or consider essentially dead.