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In Defense of Biblical Criticism

Abstract: If the Bible has a voice in contemporary intellectual discourse, it must, by definition, be one without institutional dogma or a privileged history of interpretation. As such, any turn to the Bible in contemporary intellectual discourse is an inherently Protestant project, because individuals can be asked to judge the Bible only by consulting their own consciences. This article questions the ultimate value of this approach and argues that this Protestant hermeneutic may be effective for using the Bible rhetorically, to shore up what one already thinks prior to reading it, but in the end it only mirrors the reader. In contrast, an historical approach distances the reader from the object of study, which may allow a true conversation to take place. For better or for worse, biblical criticism will not bring us beyond the age of the “historical spirit of Protestantism,” but it may provide insight into worldviews quite different from our own.

The problem of the Bible for contemporary intellectual discourse raises a question that is at once political and philosophical: what role can or should the Bible have in intellectual conversation, and on what basis might we answer this question? Certainly, we can see this only or even mainly as a political question, concerning the proper relation between church and state or between the so-called private and public spheres. But the more interesting aspect of the question, on which I would like to focus, is, What philosophical role can the Bible have in contemporary discourse? In other words, what is the intellectual rationale for turning to the Bible in contemporary discourse, and what intellectual authority can or does the Bible bring to intellectual discussion? On the one hand, the answer is not very interesting. While reference to the Bible can be, and certainly is, part of contemporary intellectual discourse, the Bible cannot (and hence does not) have any particularly privileged status in that discourse. This is obvious enough, but in what follows I would like to explore the intellectual implication of this philosophical point, which
is that, at most, the Bible can be used as a rhetorical device in current intellectual conversation.

Let me be clear that I do not wish to downplay the Bible's potential rhetorical value. What I do wish to point out, however, is that in contemporary intellectual discourse, the Bible can be used only to convince people of certain worldviews. This means that it can contribute to discussions of numbers of themes, including considerations of human dignity, justice, love, peace, and so on, but the Bible cannot contribute to discussion on its main theme, divine revelation.

I also want to be clear that I am not making a political point, that is, a point about so-called “secularism” or the like. Rather, my point is that we live in what the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen called the “historical spirit of Protestantism.” With regard to the Bible, we are all Protestants today, not in the sense of any particular theological belief, but in the sense of the method that might lead us to belief, not just about revelation but about anything.

Jacques Derrida clarifies what Cohen meant by the “historical spirit of Protestantism.” He writes:

This spirit is not to be confused with the empirical history of factual events; it is a current, a force, a telos…. It is so strong, internal, and undeniable that even the non-Protestants, the Catholics and the Jews, must recognize, beyond the institutional dogma, scientifically, rationally, philosophically, by consulting nothing but your conscience, the very essence of Protestantism, of this Protestant spirit that you have already become.²

“Consulting nothing but your conscience”—beyond any institutional dogma—is the very essence of the “Protestantism” to which, following Cohen, I refer. Where I differ from Cohen is in his equation of Judaism and its history with the “historical spirit of Protestantism.” As is well known, historically, Jews have always understood the Bible not on the basis of nothing other than their individual consciences, but as mediated by a history of exegesis (this, of course, goes for Catholics, too). Indeed, it is precisely this point I shall explore: any turn to the Bible in contemporary intellectual discourse is an inherently Protestant project, because the participants in this discourse can be asked to judge the Bible only by consulting their own consciences.

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If the Bible has a voice in contemporary intellectual discourse, it must, by definition, be one without institutional dogma or a privileged history of interpretation. This is what allows the Bible to be part of contemporary intellectual discourse, but it is also what allows the Bible to speak to any issue in current intellectual discussions except divine revelation. As Leo Strauss put it, “the purpose of the Bible, as a book, partakes of the mysterious character of the divine purpose. Man is not master of how to begin; before he begins to write he is already confronted with writings.” The Bible in contemporary intellectual discourse confronts today’s person only with his or her own conscience. The biblical dictum of Exodus 24:7, “we will do and then we will hear,” has become “we will hear and then we will do.”

Now, to be clear: I am not positing a dichotomy between the faith of the past and the reason of the present or even a dichotomy between faith and reason. The history of exegesis in Jewish thought and the history of institutional dogma in Catholic theology are each a mixture of faith and reason, or, as Anselm of Canterbury famously put it, “faith seeking understanding.” I am emphasizing, rather, that the Bible enters contemporary conversation without biblical canon because any such canon will always be accompanied by institutional adornment—whether it is Jewish, Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox. Biblical canon necessarily subjects contemporary readers not to the Bible in and of itself, but to a history of interpretation that is in one way or another already binding for the individual.

Leon Kass’ *The Beginning of Wisdom* is, in my view, the most successful recent attempt to bring the Bible without canon, and without any prior assumptions, into contemporary intellectual conversation. As Kass puts it, he approaches the Bible “without presuppositions or intermediaries.” *The Beginning of Wisdom* is a careful, provocative, and subtly close reading of Genesis. Kass claims that in reading Genesis he “attempts to understand the text in its own terms yet tries to show how such an understanding may address us in our current situation of moral and spiritual neediness.”

But there is an obvious tension between these two aspects of Kass’ project, and this tension bears itself out in the strange fact that Kass

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is able to relate Genesis to any number of themes—including, first and foremost, gender relations, family life, parenthood, and the problem of technology—but he is unable or perhaps unwilling to consider the Bible’s most basic theme, described by his teacher Leo Strauss, that “Man is not master of how to begin.” Instead, as Kass himself acknowledges, his way of reading the Bible means that man is the master of how to begin. In beginning to read Genesis, Kass seeks wisdom much in the way that “Socrates, Plato, Aristotle… seek to discover the truth about the world and our place within it.”

What worldview emerges from Kass’ reading of Genesis? Not surprisingly, the wisdom of Genesis seems rather contemporary. For instance, Kass understands Genesis 12–16 as instructing us in what he calls the meaning of marriage. He writes:

the reader, like Sarah and Abraham, is shown that God Himself supports all three crucial elements of the marital bond: 1. respect for woman’s chastity and marital sexual fidelity, which anticipates 2. the gift of children within the marriage, which makes necessary 3. the right ordering of the household, with the husband endorsing his wife’s devotion to the well-being of their children.

Does this explanation of “the meaning of marriage” really understand the text on its own terms? Let us leave aside the question of the validity of Kass’ description of the view of marriage depicted in Genesis in order to focus on the larger interpretive issue at hand. Kass continually understands Genesis, and especially the first twenty-one chapters, as elucidating the meaning of our humanity. As he puts it in his epilogue, “The book of Genesis is mainly concerned with the question: Is it possible to find, institute, and preserve a way of life that accords with man’s true standing in the world and that serves to perfect his godlike possibilities?” There can be no doubt that Genesis has things to say about being human, but what Kass calls our “godlike possibilities” is a subset of the larger framework of the book, which is the beginnings of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. If any particular conception of marriage is important in Genesis, it is because marriage produces (literally) the future of the people of Israel.

The covenant between God and Abraham and subsequently between God and the people of Israel is neither universal nor generic. Nevertheless, God’s covenant with Israel will, in time, produce a kind of universality by means of its particularity, as we read in Genesis 12:2: “I will make of

6 Ibid., p. 1.
7 Ibid., p. 292.
you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” Genesis may well have things to say about broad, humanistic themes, but the account of the human being in Genesis cannot be separated from the special covenant between God and the people of Israel. My point is neither theological nor even historical but simply literary: if we are to read the book of Genesis on its own terms, then its first twenty-one chapters must be read and understood within the context of the subsequent twenty-nine chapters.

Kass reads Genesis as an analogue to our own experience. This represents the Protestant approach that I have been describing, for it begins and ends with the notion that the individual’s conscience alone encounters and interprets the text, just as any reader’s conscience alone decides whether Kass’ interpretations are persuasive. While I do not mean to criticize him by calling his approach “Protestant,” I do intend to question the ultimate value of this approach if the aim is to talk about the Bible as the Bible. Presumably, some people, such as Kass, are interested in bringing the Bible into contemporary intellectual conversation because they believe that the Bible on its own terms has something to say to contemporary life.

This brings us to the rationale for the conference on “The Bible in Contemporary Intellectual Discourse,” to which this essay was a contribution—to consider whether the current intellectual engagement with the Bible might provide a non-faith-oriented starting point for appreciating the Bible’s contribution to civilization—as opposed to biblical criticism, which “has done an exemplary job of unearthing the meaning and significance of the Bible in its historical context.” The rationale continues, “However, the methodology employed by modern biblicalists is fundamentally opposed to that preferred by faith communities, which turn to the Bible for its capacity to guide, inspire, and instruct.” But as I have attempted to suggest with the example of Kass, if modern biblical scholarship has erred too much on the side of turning the Bible into a relic of the past, modern intellectual conversation seems to err on the side of making it too much our contemporary. So can the Bible, whose theme in one way or another concerns divine revelation, contribute to intellectual discourse, or is the Bible simply one of many so-called classical texts of Western civilization that can reflect, as a mirror does, one among a number of contemporary understandings of what it means to be human?

I would like to suggest that, contrary to the suggestion of the rationale of Cardozo’s conference, cited above, the route of modern historical scholarship, and specifically of biblical criticism, offers more opportunity to “spotlight the Bible as an asset for contemporary civilization generally,
and not only for contemporary faith communities." In order to make this point, let me first suggest that an historical approach, in the form of biblical criticism, shares more with traditional faith communities than current intellectual discussions on the Bible do. As Leo Strauss put it in a little-cited early essay:

To understand the author as he understood himself, that is precisely the ambition of the historian; but allegory appears to the historical consciousness as the mutilation of the text…. [Yet] allegory and the critique of allegory go together as one, [they agree] that it is the particular task of interpretation to mediate: to understand as the author understands himself.9

To many contemporary thinkers, philosophers and historians alike, the notion of understanding an author as he understands himself seems naïve. Yet unless one wants to concede, which I do not, that any interpretation goes, and that there are no better or worse interpretations, then Strauss has a point.

The implication of Strauss’ point becomes all the more clear in his description of an alternative modern position, which I have called “Protestant,” that “differentiates itself from allegorical [and historical] interpretation through the consciousness of the interpreter’s… superiority to the author.” Strauss is here paraphrasing Immanuel Kant’s claim to have understood Plato better than Plato had understood himself. As Kant put it in the Critique of Pure Reason:

it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.10

The notion that today’s reader understands the Bible better than the Bible understands itself is the corollary to the notion that “consulting nothing but your own conscience” determines the veracity of the Bible. This Protestant hermeneutic may be effective for using the Bible or examples

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8 This quotation and the previous two are taken from the program of the Center for Jewish Law and Contemporary Civilization at Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law conference on “The Hebrew Bible in Contemporary Intellectual Discourse,” March 16–17, 2008.


from the Bible rhetorically to shore up what one already thinks prior to reading it, but in the end it only mirrors the reader. In contrast, I suggest, biblical criticism allows the Bible actually to contribute to contemporary intellectual conversation.

Before exploring this possibility in more detail, we have to ask the additional question: why should the Bible speak to non-believers today? From the point of view of using the Bible as an analogue to our own experience, there is simply no intrinsic reason to turn to the Bible as opposed to any other great book that has contributed to human civilization. Why the Bible and not the Rig Veda? Yet a historical approach to the Bible does provide us with an answer: the Bible is relevant today because of its transpired history. As Martin Buber put it:

[The Bible] has since its beginning encountered one generation after another. Confrontation and reconciliation with it have taken place in every generation. Sometimes it is met with obedience and offered dominion; sometimes, with offense and rebellion.... Even where people have said “no” to it, that “no” has only validated the book’s claim upon them—they have borne witness to it even in refusing themselves to it.

It is otherwise with people today.... People today have little access to sure belief, and cannot be given such access. When they are in earnest, they know this and do not let themselves be deceived. But openness to belief is not denied them. They too can, precisely when they are in earnest, open themselves up to this book and let themselves be struck by its rays wherever they may strike.11

In these comments, Buber attempts to defend his translation, with Franz Rosenzweig, of the Bible into German. Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation tried to force the German language to express the concepts and connotations contained in the sounds of the Hebrew original and as such to shock the reader into paying attention to the strangeness of the Bible.12

However, despite their attempt to allow modern readers to encounter the Bible in its strangeness, Buber and Rosenzweig’s project was, as they fully acknowledged, still a Protestant one, since it asked the reader to read and respond to the Bible alone, without canon. Indeed, recognizing what he regarded as the necessity of this historically very un-Jewish


12 For more on this issue, see Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s collected essays on the subject in *Scripture and Translation*. 
(and un-Catholic) approach, Rosenzweig wrote, “All modern Jews, and German Jews more than others, are Protestants.”

The development of biblical criticism was, of course, also largely a Protestant endeavor, and not surprisingly so, since many of its early proponents sought to move away from institutional dogma and toward what they regarded as the essential and universal truth of Christianity. Biblical criticism as it has developed, however, has come to see the Bible as anything but simple. It is precisely in recognizing the complexity of the biblical text—a complexity, of course, recognized as well by traditional commentators—that biblical criticism can offer an opportunity to appreciate the Bible on its own terms. And rather than turning the Bible into a relic of the past, appreciating the Bible on its own terms may in fact provide a way to bring it into conversation with the present.

Jon Levenson’s 1993 *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* exemplifies this possibility in offering a phenomenological account of the relation between the Bible’s view of the creation of the world, the persistence of evil, the nature of God, and the human being’s role in the world. Levenson begins from the ground up, that is, from the biblical text understood as a historical text. In large part, his book considers what biblical critics call the P source, or the Priestly source. As Levenson summarizes the argument of his book:

> although critical scholars are nearly universal in ascribing Genesis 1:1–2:3 to P, the Priestly source in the Pentateuch, the affinities of this crucial text with the Priestly theology of the cultus have not been sufficiently explored. In particular, the connection of this cosmogony with ancient Near Eastern temple building has been missed. This failure… has led generally to a neglect of the role of humanity in forming and sustaining the world order therein described. This neglect has helped obscure the fact that this text too deals in large part with the questions of how to neutralize the powerful and ongoing threat of chaos.14

According to Levenson, the Priestly creation story “is not about the banishment of evil but about its control.”15 Comparing Genesis 1–2:3 to the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elish*, Levenson contends that the primordial chaos out of which God creates (*tohu vavohu*) may continually erupt again. It is the human being’s task to beseech God to keep his end

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15 Ibid., p. 127.
of his covenant: “The God to whom this theology bears witness is not the one who continually acts in history, but... [rather] the God who will reactivate his mighty deeds and close the horrific parenthesis that is ordinary history.”

To quote again from the Cardozo conference program, Levenson's analysis, like historical criticism generally, has indeed “done an exemplary job of unearthing the meaning and significance of the Bible in its historical context, and careful philological study has illuminated much about the Bible and its place in the literature of the ancient Near East.” But are the results of Levenson's analysis necessarily opposed to those “preferred by faith communities, which turn to the Bible for its capacity to guide, inspire, and instruct”? Certainly faith communities and biblical critics differ on the question of the historicity of the Bible and therefore about the Bible's authority. But it seems to me that Levenson actually offers contemporary intellectuals—be they believers or not—an opportunity for guidance, inspiration, and instruction, regardless of whether one is inspired, revolted, or something in between by the biblical theology he presents. From Levenson’s critical reading, we are offered a view of evil as an ever-present possibility and of the human being’s power to affect the created world. The God described by Levenson is one who needs humanity, and indeed a particular group of humanity, to perfect creation. Levenson’s reading of the Bible’s priestly source allows the Bible’s own themes to emerge more clearly. The Bible can speak not only about themes that concern us today—such as the problems of technology, the status of the nuclear family, gender relations in the age of feminism—but also about a worldview quite different from that of modern intellectual life: a worldview that brings to life a God who relates to and is affected by the actions of human beings. To the modern mind, believer or not, this worldview is surprising. As Levenson puts it,

The detachment of the physical world from the moral and spiritual worlds (and the casting of the reality of the nonphysical realm into doubt) has been a hallmark of modern Western thought.... One of my goals [is]... to show that this detachment is not consonant with the theologies of creation in the Hebrew Bible.... The very point that has been seen as a weakness of these biblical conceptions of creation may prove to be an outstanding asset—their deep engagement with the problem of evil and their inseparability from the engaged religious life.”

16 Ibid., p. 50.

17 Ibid., p. 27.
In conclusion, biblical criticism, for better or for worse, will not bring us beyond the age of the “historical spirit of Protestantism.” But an historical approach to the Bible might constructively bring it into contemporary intellectual conversation in a way that a non-historical approach cannot. An historical approach creates distance between us and the object of study. But this distance means that a true conversation can actually take place. Contemporary intellectual discourse requires that conversation partners consult no authority other than their consciences in deciding what is true and valuable. What a historical approach to the Bible provides is something about which the individual conscience can judge.

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